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Grimgar
of
Fantasy
and
Ash

level. 7
The Rainbow on the Other Side

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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level.7 - The Rainbow on the Other Side

Written by: Ao Jyumonji

Illustrations by: Eiri Shirai

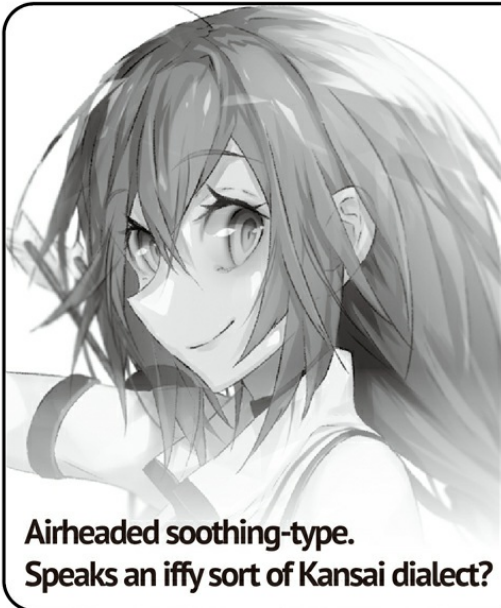


As they got closer, he gradually figured out the situation.
The lights were no illusion. He could see a number of buildings clearly.
It wasn't large enough to be called a town. A small village, maybe.



Yume was being unusually nice to Ranta.
Actually, Haruhiro wasn't sure when or how it happened,
but Yume was letting him rest his head in her lap.
That was so incredibly unusual, he doubted his eyes.

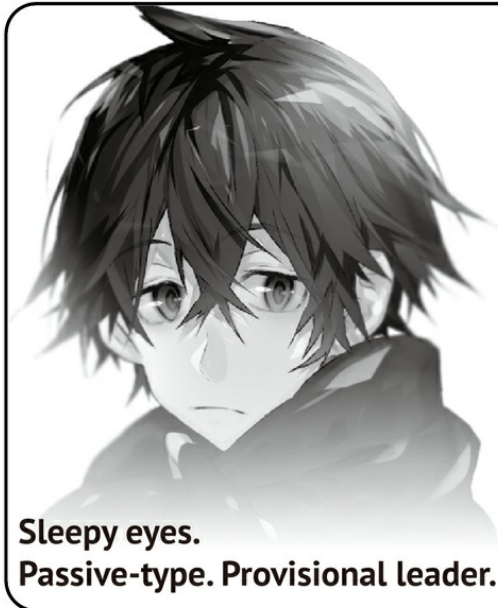
Characters



**Y
U
M
E**

Airheaded soothing-type.
Speaks an iffy sort of Kansai dialect?

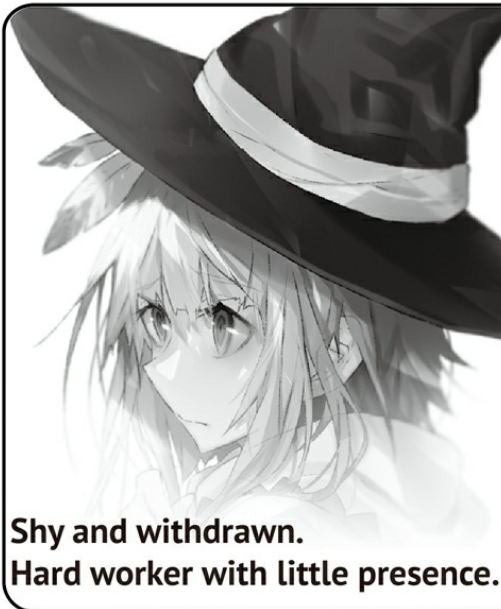
Class —
Hunter



**H
A
R
U
H
I
R
O**

Sleepy eyes.
Passive-type. Provisional leader.

Class —
Thief



**S
H
I
H
O
R
U**

Shy and withdrawn.
Hard worker with little presence.

Class —
Mage



**R
A
N
T
A**

Selfish, flaky joker.
#1 most unpopular.

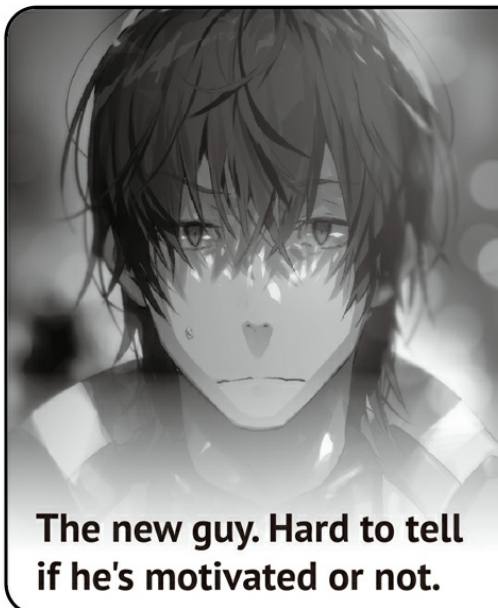
Class —
Dread
Knight



**M
E
R
R
Y**

Cool beauty. Has more experience
as a volunteer soldier and is a little
more of an adult.

Class —
Priest



**K
U
Z
A
K
U**

The new guy. Hard to tell
if he's motivated or not.

Class —
Paladin

Other Characters

Team Renji

Renji - Class: Warrior
Head of Team Renji. Wild beast-type. Dangerous.

Ron - Class: Paladin
The Team's No. 2.

Sassa - Class: Thief
Flashy woman. Probably an M.

Adachi - Class: Mage
Wears glasses.

Chibi - Class: Priest
Mascot.

Team Tokimune (Tokkis)

Tokimune - Class: Paladin
Handsome. Friendly optimist.

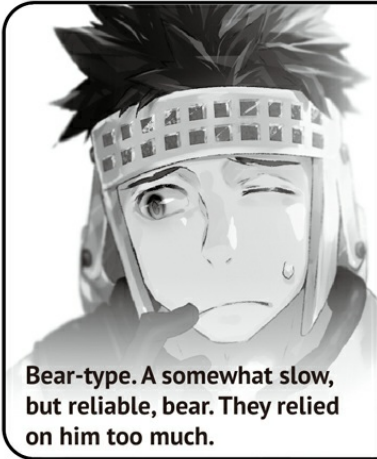
Inui - Class: Hunter
Looks middle aged. Has middle school syndrome, maybe?

Tada - Class: Priest
Fighting priest. Real showoff. Kind of a serious headcase.

Mimori - Class: Mage
Ex-warrior mage. Nickname is "Giantess."

Anna-san - Class: Priest
Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, self-proclaimed pretty girl.

Kikkawa - Class: Warrior
Good at getting by in the world. Enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro and the others.



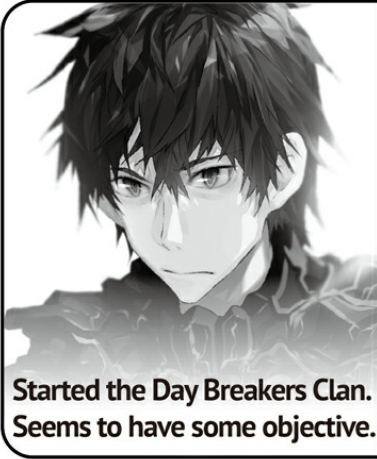
Bear-type. A somewhat slow, but reliable, bear. They relied on him too much.

**M
O
G
U
Z
O**
Class – Warrior



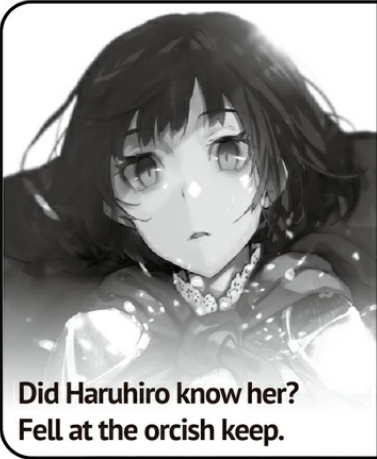
Kept the party together. Was a good guy. (Past tense)

**M
A
N
A
T
O**
Class – Priest



Started the Day Breakers Clan. Seems to have some objective.

**S
O
M
A**
Class – Samurai



Did Haruhiro know her? Fell at the orcish keep.

**C
H
O
C
O**
Class – Thief

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1. The Blurry Ridge



Gremlins chanted all around them.

“Nafushuperah, toburoh, furagurashurah, purapurapuryoh.”

“Anabushoh, fakanakanah, barauarafurenyoh, kurakoshoh.”

“Kachabyuryohoh, kyabashah, chapah, ryubaryaburyah, hokoshoh.”

Blue light leaked out from hole upon hole upon hole. How many gremlins lived here in these flats? Hundreds? Thousands? Tens of thousands, maybe?

Those creatures that looked like a bat combined with a goblin were fundamentally harmless. Even knowing that, though, they were a little scary. If something went wrong and they attacked, the party wouldn’t stand a chance.

After they made it through the Gremlin Flats, they came to the Egg Storage.

The layout of this place was simple. There was a single path along which there was a series of oblong rooms where the gremlins laid their eggs. The party had no interest in the eggs, so they just kept going down the path and ignoring the rooms.

We can just keep going, right? Haruhiro thought.

Haruhiro looked to Ranta, Kuzaku, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry again and again, making sure they were still there, as he asked himself if they should go on or turn back. Ask as he might, he never came to an answer. He had no clue what he ought to do.

The dominatrix, Lala, and her servant, Nono, were up ahead, moving at a careful but confident pace. Nono carried a lantern, its light illuminating Lala’s bold and extreme appearance.

Honestly, she didn’t have to accentuate her womanly parts and expose

herself as much as she did; just barely hiding the bits she absolutely couldn't show in public. It wasn't like Haruhiro wanted to see those bits. But... he couldn't help but look. Did she just like to show off? Maybe she was aiming for every reaction she could possibly get from showing off like that.

Nono, who was white-haired and wore a black mask that covered the bottom of his face, was silent. In fact, Haruhiro had yet to hear him speak. Whenever they took a break, he served as Lala's chair. That was, well...

They were an odd couple, to put it lightly.

They were capable. Terrifyingly so. Reliable, too. But, was it okay to rely on them? That was somewhat iffy. It felt like if the party trusted them too much, they would be taken for suckers and suffer for it.

Eventually the group came to the end of the Egg Storage. From there on, it really was a single straight path. The path gently curved to the right before suddenly taking a sharp turn in that direction.

It came to a T junction.

Haruhiro felt a sense of déjà vu. It was nearly identical to the entrance to the Egg Storage in the Wonder Hole. The T junctions there had met up again whether you went left or right, and the Wonder Hole had been on the other side.

Can we make it back through here, maybe?

For a moment, he thought that. But naturally, that wasn't the case.

Lala and Nono went right at the T junction. Another curve. As expected, the path split. They turned right, then went a long way. The tight, twisted path with its low ceiling seemed to go on forever.

The two paths were similar, but this wasn't like the entrance in the Wonder Hole. Where exactly would they come out? Could Haruhiro and the others go back home?

"We're near the exit," Lala told them in a whisper.

Now that she mentioned it, the air was flowing slightly. The temperature had dropped a little. When Nono covered the lantern, it was suddenly pitch black.

No sign of light up ahead.

“Is it night...?” Ranta whispered, gulping.

There was the sound of someone sighing. Footsteps. The rustling of clothes. The clinking of armor. Breathing.

The cover on the lantern was not lifted. There was a small amount of light leaking out from the gaps in the cover.

Lala stopped, making some gesture to Nono. Haruhiro and the party stopped, too. It seemed Lala intended to have Nono go investigate the situation by himself.

Nono knew how to use Sneaking. As a thief himself, Haruhiro could recognize it. Nono used it at a fairly high level, too.

Nono left the lantern with Lala, then melted into the darkness, making not so much as a single sound, and soon vanished from sight. It was probably around five minutes later that Nono returned.

Nono moved in close to Lala, perhaps to whisper something in her ear, but Haruhiro couldn't pick up his voice. Either way, Lala nodded once, then gave the lantern back to Nono and began walking. Haruhiro and the others had no choice but to follow.

The lantern was still covered, and it was still completely dark like before, but they were clearly approaching the outside.

Just a little longer, Haruhiro told himself. We're almost there.

“Mrrowr...” Yume let out a strange sound.

The outside was damp, locked in a cold darkness. There were noises, but from what?

Ou, ou, ou...

That sound steadily repeated—was it the cry of some animal? There was a continuous high-pitched sound, too. Was that one the beating of some insect's wings?

There was another one that sounded like the rapid clicking of someone's

tongue. It was creepy, and it made him uncomfortable.

“Where is this place...?” Kuzaku whispered weakly.

Someone was sobbing. It had to be Shihoru.

“It’s okay,” Merry said, trying to encourage her, but her voice was shaking.

“Night...” Haruhiro had a sudden thought. “Could this be that place? The Night Realm?”

Lala and Nono were the ones who had discovered that the Gremlin Flats that were accessible from the Wonder Hole were connected to another world in addition to the Dusk Realm. No morning or night ever came to the Dusk Realm, but in this other world, it was only night; the day never came. That was why it was called the Night Realm.

“Wait, if that’s true...” Ranta did a little dance. “...we can get back, don’tcha think?!”

“Possibly,” Lala snorted. “Possibly not. That place is dangerous in its own ways. We’ve barely explored it ourselves. Too dangerous.”

Haruhiro rubbed his belly. His stomach hurt. Intensely. Even the jubilant Ranta fell silent.

Even at this very moment, some unknown creature might appear from the darkness to attack them.

“So, on that note, we’ll be going,” Lala said briskly.

Then Lala and Nono moved away from them. It took Haruhiro a moment to understand what her words and that action meant.

“...Huh?! That’s—whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on?!” he yelped.

“What?” Lala asked.

“No, you’re going—Huh? What does that mean... Huh? Huh...? Just the two of you... By yourselves?” he stuttered.

“We have no clue what’s up ahead, after all,” she told him.

“No, w-we have no idea either, obviously, but... But, still...”

“When in an unfamiliar place, experience tells me the two of us are best to move on our own. That’s how we’ve always worked, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“No, b-but...”

“Don’t...!” Ranta got down and performed a kowtow. “Don’t leave meeeee! Please, please! Seriously, seriously! I’m begging you! Don’t leave me here!”

Even Haruhiro, who thought he was well aware of what kind of human, or piece of trash, Ranta was, was appalled by this display. He couldn’t possibly not be.

How is he not embarrassed with himself? He’s just too shameless. And hold on, what’s this “me” stuff? Seriously, he only ever thinks about himself. I knew that, but he’s still horrible and the worst...

“Bye.” Lala might have waved to them, or maybe she didn’t. Either way, they couldn’t see her anymore.

The dominatrix and her servant were gone.

“Wh-What... now?” Kuzaku asked in a whisper.

Oh, crap. This is bad, thought Haruhiro. I can’t believe how dark it is. I can’t see anything. It’s solid darkness.

Haruhiro had been trapped inside some dark mass. He couldn’t move, couldn’t escape. This was the end.

—No, that wasn’t true. It was all an illusion.

“R-Right, first thing’s first, we need light...” Haruhiro rummaged through his bag and pulled out a lantern. Once it was lit, he felt a little calmer.

Yume had pulled out her own lantern, and was trying to light it, too.

Haruhiro stopped her. “We only need the one. Just mine, for now. I want to conserve oil.”

“Ohhh. Yeah, that makes sense, huh...”

“Damn that woman.” Ranta punched the ground and ground his teeth. “I’ll never forgive her.”

“Don’t cry, man...” Haruhiro said.

“I-I’m not crying! You’re stupid, stupid, stupid Haruhiro! Urgh...”

Merry was hugging Shihoru tight. If she hadn’t been, Shihoru looked like she would have collapsed at any moment.

Haruhiro took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax. *I need to keep it together. I’m the leader, after all. I need to support everyone. Need to pull them along. I won’t let anyone die. We’re going to survive. We’ll all get through this alive.*

“Let’s move,” he said. “Take it a bit at a time. Things will work out. I’ll make them work out. I’m... Or rather, well, all of us are here. Just be careful not to make too much noise. If you sense anything coming, let me know right away. Then, we’ll take things cautiously and... Yeah. Okay. Let’s go.”

I’m just rambling. Even I know that. What am I thinking? What should I be thinking about? I don’t know. But, staying here is bad—right? Or maybe I just don’t want to stay here? It might be that I’m just scared to stay put. But, I mean, Lala and Nono took off immediately. Yeah. We shouldn’t stay here.

Haruhiro and the others had their backs to a rock wall. The hole that led to the Egg Storage opened up out of that rock wall.

Lala and Nono had vanished off to the left. There was a gradual downwards slope in front of them.

The ground was uneven. Rocky. Right, forwards, or straight?

He didn’t hesitate long. Haruhiro decided to go after Lala and Nono. They probably couldn’t catch up, but those two had gone left. It would be somewhat safer than going right... maybe?

While checking his footing, they proceeded carefully along the rock wall to their left. They walked as if they were crossing a narrow bridge.

Is this too slow? Should we hurry? What good will rushing do? It would help if it would just get brighter. Does morning come in this world?

Shihoru was sobbing convulsively.

“Oh, cut it out, would you?” Ranta clicked his tongue. “—Ow!”

“Shut up, you dummy!” It sounded like Yume had hit Ranta.

If I open my mouth, I feel like I'll start whining, Haruhiro thought. Time. How much time has passed? I can't even imagine. How long do we need to walk? Should we rest? Are my comrades tired? Should I ask? Are they hungry? Thirsty? We need water. Food, too. What do we do? How can we secure those? Is everyone going to survive? Is that a realistic goal, in this situation?

At some point, Shihoru had stopped crying. The rock wall had been at almost a 90-degree angle before, but it was much less steep now. It felt like he could probably climb it, but he didn't feel like climbing.

Off to the right there was darkness, darkness, endless darkness. Even holding the lantern up in that direction, he couldn't see a thing.

The animal cries, the batting of wings, the clicking... He heard what sounded like animal noises coming from here and there periodically.

Suddenly, the wind blew against them.

“Hold on.” Haruhiro raised one hand for his comrades to come to stop.

He inched forward. The ground in front of him soon disappeared. It was a cliff. There was a cliff here.

How high was it? Crouching down, he lowered the lantern as far as he could. He couldn't see. The bottom was too far.

He listened closely. Was that... the sound of water? Was there a river down there?

Water. If there was a river, there would be water. Though, that said, they couldn't make it down the cliff. They couldn't jump off, either.

He picked up a stone and threw it off. Soon there was a splashing sound. It didn't seem like it was dozens of meters; it had to be around ten.

“There's water down there,” Haruhiro said.

But he got no reaction. Not even from Ranta. Everyone must have been exhausted, both in body and soul.

“We'll continue along the edge of the cliff here and look for a way down,”

Haruhiro said. "If we can just get water..."

"...Yeah," Kuzaku responded briefly.

"Shihoru, you okay?" Haruhiro asked, to which Shihoru silently nodded.

She didn't seem okay. That concerned him, but if they could find drinking water, even Shihoru would start to feel a little safer. But, was the river water potable? Not as it was, probably. But, if they boiled it—Right, by kindling a fire...

They'd have to be careful not to fall off the cliff, too. He didn't think anyone was that stupid, but just in case.

There was a strong, damp wind along the cliff that was unpleasantly cold. If they didn't warm themselves eventually, they weren't just going to feel cold, they'd start shivering.

Eventually, a fog came out, too. The ground was no longer rocky. It felt like there was something like grass growing on top of the dirt. The grass-like stuff wasn't green, it was white. Was it really grass?

"Whoa!" Ranta suddenly jumped. "Wha, wha, wha...!"

"What?" Haruhiro asked.

"I-I just stepped on something! Nothing alive, I think, but—Ahh!" Ranta picked something up. It was a white object. "Look at this! Bones!"

Shihoru shrieked.

"What're you pickin' 'em up for?" Yume asked.

"You're unbelievable..." Merry muttered.

With that concentrated attack from the girls, Ranta got defensive and started waving the white object around. "What're you scared of some stupid bones for? You stupid women! What's there to be afraid of? I'm totally fine. Because I'm me!"

"What kind of bones are they?" Haruhiro asked, squinting at them.

A hand, huh. It looked like a skeletal hand. If it hadn't fallen apart after the blasphemous treatment Ranta had been giving it, there had to be dried flesh or something holding it together.

“Hmm?” Ranta brought his face up close and inspected it. “Size-wise, it could be human... but the fingers are too long. Yeah, too long. Wait, there’re too many of them. Like, eight? Hmm?”

Kuzaku crouched down next to Ranta. The rest of the bones were apparently there, hidden by the long, white grass-like stuff.

“...Yeah, doesn’t look human,” Kuzaku agreed. “Some other creature, I guess.”

Yume, Shihoru, and Merry backed away. Haruhiro moved over to where Ranta and Kuzaku were and crouched down.

It’s a skeleton, I guess, or a dead body. It’s wearing what looks like some sort of metal armor. Two arms, two legs. A tail, too, so it’s probably not human. No head anywhere to be seen. Maybe it never had one to begin with? Or maybe some animal took off with it? Looks like it’s lying face down. The long, thin object looks like a sword. The round one, that’s—a shield, maybe? The white, grass-like stuff is wrapped around it.

Kuzaku grabbed the edge of the shield and pulled. The white, grass-like stuff snapped as he did. “Think I could use it?”

“A paladin without a shield’s about as useful as a maggot, after all,” Ranta agreed. “Take it.” Ranta chunked the skeletal hand aside and picked up the sword. “This one’s no good. It’s rusted like crazy.”

Haruhiro gave a frowning glance after the hand Ranta had thrown away, then looked down at the man’s body. Well, the body could very well have been a woman, not a man, but Haruhiro was going to assume he had been male for convenience’s sake.

The man was armed, so that probably meant he’d been a sentient being from this world. How much time had passed since he died? It seemed unlikely that it had only been a few days. A few months? A year? A few years? Or decades, maybe?

“Ranta, turn him face up,” Haruhiro ordered.

“Hell. No. Why should I have to do what you tell me to? Go die.”

“I’ll do it.” Kuzaku lifted the man up and turned him over. “There we go...”

Haruhiro closely examined the man now that he was facing upwards. The head had definitely been cut off or something. Haruhiro could see what looked like the neck bones.

There were box-shaped containers fixed to the man's belt. Haruhiro opened one and took out the contents. It was dark, hard, and round... Was this a coin? There were also a number of what looked to be seeds and a rusty dagger. Was that a key, maybe? Some sort of tool. It was hanging from a chain around the man's neck.

That's a pretty chain, thought Haruhiro. It looks like it might be gold. It couldn't possibly be pure gold, though.

When he brushed the dirt off of the front of the armor, he realized there was writing or a pattern of some sort carved there. Writing, probably. The same sort of characters were on the coin-like black object, too.

Incidentally, back in Grimgar, he had heard the orcs had their own unique language, while the undead used one that closely resembled the language used by elves, dwarves, and humans. It was probably best to assume this race was intelligent, probably on the same level as Haruhiro and the others, or close at least.

"Haru-kun." Yume pulled on Haruhiro's cloak. "...Y'know, Yume's thinkin' she might be hearin' a rustlin' noise."

Ranta reacted with a start and looked around the area. Merry and Shihoru huddled close together, holding their breath. Kuzaku held the man's shield at the ready, crouching on one knee with a hand on the hilt of his longsword.

Haruhiro quickly threw all of the man's possessions into his bag. He listened closely.

...Rustle. Rustle. Rustle. Rustle. Rustle...

He definitely heard something. From the opposite direction of the cliff. Watch for it? Flee? Haruhiro decided instantly. It was a compromise between the two. They'd retreat while staying on watch.

"Let's stay on guard as we move forward," he ordered. "Ranta, Kuzaku—" He waved his hands to get people in formation.

Haruhiro took point, Merry, Yume, and Shihoru formed one column behind him, while Ranta and Kuzaku were beside them on the side opposite the cliff. Was carrying a light here like saying “Please, come after us?” But if they put out the lantern, then they would be in total darkness. There was the risk they’d fall off the cliff, too.

Haruhiro and the others began to move.

Rustle... rustle... rustle...

He could still hear that sound. Was it coming after them? It didn’t seem that far off. It was pretty close. Within ten meters? No, probably less. It was closer than that.

He felt compelled to see whatever it really was with his own eyes. Wouldn’t that be a good idea? No. He couldn’t decide.

While remaining careful of the cliff, he kept listening closely to the sound for any sign of change...

This is driving me crazy. I don’t want to do it anymore, he thought over and over again. Once every few minutes. When it was at its worst, he thought it every few seconds.

He wanted to throw everything away and run. Run? Where to...?

The lantern’s fire’s getting weak. The moment he thought that, it was gone.

“Whaaaaa?! Parupiro, come on! I can’t see, you moron! You scum!” Ranta screamed.

“The oil just ran out, okay? Uh, well, next we’ll use Yume’s lantern to—”

“Hold on,” Merry said in a stifled voice. “The sky...”

Haruhiro looked off into the distance, beyond the cliff. She was right. There was something about the sky.

“Is it... morning?” Haruhiro asked slowly.

There was a ridge in the distance burning faintly. It was red, or orange rather. It was strange. Normally, when the sun rose in the morning, the darkness gradually faded from the edge of the sky. It would turn blue or purple, then

grow redder. It never looked the way this did, like the sky had suddenly caught fire.

He knew there were worlds like the Dusk Realm. If this world's sky changed in strange ways, that wasn't going to be enough to surprise him at this point.

But, at the very least, this doesn't seem to be Grimgar or the Dusk Realm. The realization hit him pretty hard.

"Huh...?"

Haruhiro craned his neck. He didn't hear the rustling sound anymore. Had it gone away? Or was it just laying low? Either way, he figured it would be a good idea to get away from this spot while they had the chance. Haruhiro signaled for them to set off.

That was when it happened.

"Mrrow!" Yume made a strange noise and collapsed. No. She hadn't collapsed. She'd been knocked down. There was something on top of Yume. "Something"—that was the only way he could describe it. He couldn't see.

"Ohhhhhh?! " Ranta was trying to pull that something off of Yume.

"Damn, it's too dark!" Kuzaku shouted.

"Yume! Yume! Yume...!" Haruhiro shouted his comrade's name as he rushed towards the thing. Because he was flustered, he nearly lost his footing and fell off the cliff, which made him majorly panic.

He could hear the sounds of punching, hitting. Yume was crying and screaming.

"It took off!" Ranta shouted.

There was a light. From a candle. A portable candlestick, huh. It was Shihoru.

Shihoru sat down next to Yume with the candlestick. "Yume! Hang in there!"

"The enemy! That bastard! Where is he?! Dammit!" Ranta was swinging his sword around.

"What was that?!" Kuzaku had his shield at the ready, his shoulders heaving with heavy breaths.

Yume had fallen over, clutching at her throat. Blood. The blood. Her neck. It'd gotten her neck. Blood. So much blood.

Kuh. Fuh. Fuh. Hah. Kuh. Fuh. Hah. Yume's breathing was strained, shallow, and ragged.

Haruhiro was stunned. *No way. Don't do this to me. You're kidding. What the hell? Tell me it's a lie, somebody. Please, tell me it's a lie. No. This is wrong. It's a lie. It can't be real. Right? I mean, it makes no sense. This makes no sense.*

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Haruhiro screamed.

His level head. His sense of duty. His responsibility. His self-control. His reason. His ability to think. All of those were blasted away.

Haruhiro didn't even cling to Yume. He just stood there and screamed. He knew one thing, and that was that he couldn't take anymore. He had totally snapped.

It's over. Just let it end. No, I can't let it end, but what can I do? I mean, there's nothing I can do, is there? It's hopeless, isn't it? Yume's gonna die, isn't she?

“O light...!” Merry touched her five fingers to her forehead, making a pentagram, then touched her middle finger to her brow to complete the hexagram. Then, rushing over, she brought her palm to her Yume’s throat. “May Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you! Sacrament!”

—What? Haruhiro thought numbly. *What are you doing? Have you gone nuts? It's hopeless. I mean, light magic doesn't work in the Dusk Realm! Sure, this isn't the Dusk Realm, but it's not Grimgar, so Lumiaris's power shouldn't reach here, and—*

No doubt Merry knew all of that. Was she unable to give up, even knowing that? Had she decided to bet on that one thin thread of hope?

“...Ahh... Hah...” Yume blinked repeatedly. “Huh...?”

Her body was wreathed in a dim light.

Merry gritted her teeth. Her shoulders, her arms, her hands, her whole body was shuddering.

This can't be real, right? Haruhiro thought, stunned. *Really? No lie?*

“...Your wounds!” Shihoru’s eyes went wide. “Yume! Your wounds are closing!”

Ranta stopped swinging his sword and stood there staring blankly at Yume.

“Haha!” Kuzaku laughed like a crazy man. “Ahaha! Hahahahaha! Wahahaha!”

Haruhiro wanted to laugh along. How could he not want to? What could he do but laugh? But, for some reason, he cried instead.

Yume still hadn’t gotten up. Merry’s healing still wasn’t done. It was taking a surprisingly long time for Sacrament.

Haruhiro got down on all fours next to Yume. Merry finally pulled her hand back and fell on her backside. Her breathing was rough. She looked pretty spent.

Yume looked at her, then smiled softly. “Thank you, Merry-chan. Huh? Haru-kun, what’re you cryin’—”

“Yume!” Haruhiro hugged Yume without really meaning to. “Thank goodness! Thank goodness, Yume! Thank...! Sorry! I thought you were a goner, so...!”

“Ohhh,” said Yume. “If you squeeze tight like that, Haru-kun, you’ll get blood on you, y’know?”

“Who cares?!” he screamed.

“Okay then. But, still, when you’re squeezin’ her tight like this, Yume, she’s happy, but it hurts a little, y’know?”

“S-S-S-S-Sorry!” When Haruhiro hurriedly tried to let go and jump back, someone whacked him hard in the back of the head. “—Ow?! Huh?! R-Ranta?! What was that for, all of a sudden?!”

“For nothing, you damn idiot!” Ranta glared at him and tried to intimidate him.

Seriously, what was that about? Was he a moron? Was he total scum?

“Sorry to interrupt, but...” Kuzaku said hesitantly. “...don’t you think it’d be a good idea to get away from here? I mean, we did let the thing from earlier get away...”

“Ah!” Haruhiro wiped his face with both hands. *Oh, right. He’s right. I completely lost myself there. I need to do some serious reflecting on that, but it can wait. For now, I should do what Kuzaku suggested.*

“Y-Yume, can you stand?!” Haruhiro exclaimed. “Merry, how about you? Oh, right, someone, get a lantern out! Okay, now then, let’s go!”

Before they set out, he looked once more to the ridge that was burning orange.

Was the sun coming up?

He couldn’t imagine that was the case.

2. Please



It seemed highly likely that their unknown assailant had scaled the cliff to attack Yume. Haruhiro and the party kept a cautious distance from the cliff as they pressed onward.

They knew from the fact that light magic had worked that the power of the god of light Lumiaris extended to this world. However, from what Merry told them, when she had cast Sacrament, it had been many times more draining than usual. It had also taken an awful long time for Yume's wounds to heal. Haruhiro found those both strange. Normally, Sacrament was a spell that instantly healed all wounds.

They tried having Ranta summon his demon to see what would happen, and it came out like it was supposed to. It looked like a person with a purple sheet over its head, with two hole-like eyes, and beneath them a gash-like mouth. It carried a knife-like blade in its right hand, and a club-like weapon in its left. It had legs, even though it was just sort of floating there. This was Ranta's demon, Zodiac-kun... but it was a third of its usual size.

So the power of the dark god Skullhell reached this world, too. However, due to the issue of distance, perhaps, or some other cause, Lumiaris and Skullhell could only provide about a third of their usual protection.

Well, whether it was a third or a quarter, it was still a step up from nothing. Thanks to that, Yume had survived. Praise be to Lumiaris.

While they were somehow able to use light magic now, they still couldn't afford to relax. Haruhiro was watching carefully for any presences. Naturally, this was exhausting. Whenever it became so hard on him that he thought he might break, his mind flashed back to Yume on the brink of death. He never wanted to experience that again. What was a little struggle now compared to

that? He just had to tough it out. If he could tough it out, that meant he wasn't at his limit yet.

No matter how much time passed, the sky grew no lighter. The sun in this world was incredibly shy, it seemed. In the end, the sun never rose, and the flame-like light he'd glimpsed coming from beyond the distant ridge burned out. When night came, it became pitch dark, making him realize it had still been relatively bright in the middle of the day.

Everyone was silent. Occasionally Ranta would say something stupid, as if he had just remembered that was a thing he did, but it never developed into anything fit to be called a conversation. Whenever someone stopped walking, they would take a break.

The morning that he couldn't think of as morning came, and then the night that was deeper than night came. His hopes had been misplaced when he'd been waiting for morning to come. Still, whenever the flames on the ridge burned out, he felt his chest tighten with a feeling of helplessness.

They were all volunteer soldiers, even if not very good ones, so they had all been carrying emergency rations and water with them. Their supplies quickly ran out.

Ranta would occasionally summon Zodiac-kun and chat with the demon. He might have been trying to distract himself. Haruhiro began to doubt his own sanity. Even if he saw lights ahead of them, he thought they were a dream or illusion. He was seeing things that couldn't be real. They had to be illusions.

There were lights like bonfires that flickered in and out of being here and there. It didn't seem like a natural phenomenon. If it was no illusion, they were probably being lit by some intelligent life forms. Was there some connection between those intelligent life forms and the ambusher that had nearly killed Yume? He couldn't possibly know.

The ground was on a gentle downward slope. How far was it to the light? A kilometer or so?

As they got closer, he gradually figured out the situation. The lights were no illusion. He could see a number of buildings clearly. He was able to confirm a watchtower-like building, too. The lights seemed to be from bonfires and lamps.

There were fires lit hanging from the eaves of buildings and up in the watchtower. There were maybe twenty of them.

It wasn't large enough to be called a town. A small village, maybe.

The issue was the residents. He called them residents, but obviously, they weren't people.

"What... should we do?" Haruhiro asked hesitantly.

"Man, what do you mean, 'what'?" Ranta sighed. "...What are we gonna do?"

"Keehe... Don't ask, you runny piece of crap, Ranta... Worry and agonize over it... until you die... Ehehehe."

"Don't talk like that, even as a joke, Zodiac-kun," Ranta said. "Not now. It's kind of depressing. It's just too much..."

"Don't worry... Kehe... Kehehe..."

"Well, I'm not, you know?" Ranta said defensively. "I understand that it's just your dark sense of humor, okay?"

"Ehehehe... Ehe... That a misunderstanding... Zodiac-kun always serious... Ehe..."

"No way, seriously?! For real?! And wait, why did you say that like you have a heavy accent?!"

"Ranta-kun sure is energetic, huh," Kuzaku muttered.

Who was it that said, "If you have energy, you can do anything"? Haruhiro didn't think you could do everything if you had energy. But without energy, there were probably a lot of things you couldn't do. So it shouldn't have been a bad thing that Ranta was getting his energy back, but he was noisy and annoying.

"We shouldn't approach carelessly..." Shihoru said hesitantly.

"She's right." Merry agreed. "We don't know what's lying in wait, after all."

"But it makes you wanna find out what's goin' on in there." Yume's stomach groaned loudly. "...Uh. Oof. Yume, she's gettin' hungry..."

Yeah... Of course she is, Haruhiro thought.

Honestly, their hunger and thirst were reaching dangerous levels. They needed to procure more water and provisions soon, or they were going to be finished.

“I’ll go scout it out,” Haruhiro said. “You all stay here.”

“We’re counting on you, thief.” Ranta slapped Haruhiro on the shoulder.

That irritated him, but Haruhiro held himself back, leaning in close to whisper in Ranta’s ear. “If anything happens, I’m counting on you to handle the rest.”

“S-Sure. ...Well, if it comes to that. C-Come back, okay, you moron? In one piece.”

“It’s creepy when you act like that,” Haruhiro muttered.

Haruhiro instantly shifted into a fresh frame of mind. First, he eliminated his presence—Hide. Second, he moved with his presence eliminated—Swing. Third, he utilized all of his senses to detect the presences of others—Sense.

In other words, he used Stealth.

He imagined himself slipping underground without a sound, becoming a mole and moving through the earth. At the same time, he would stick his eyes and ears up from the surface, looking and listening. Sensing.

He heard a sound.

Clang, clang! It was the sound of something hard being beaten.

The closest light was the bonfire on top of the watchtower. There was a moat around 25 meters from the watchtower. It looked to be about two meters across or somewhere thereabouts. Its depth was unknown. It probably wasn’t shallow, though.

There was a humanoid creature sitting up in the watchtower. Its torso was strangely large, while its head was small. That small head was wrapped in something like cloth. Was that a bow and quiver of arrows slung over its back? That creature was a lookout, no doubt about that. The residents of the small village were protecting themselves against intrusion with the moat, and they even had a lookout posted. It wasn’t going to be possible to go in there, after all.

No, it was too soon to make that call. Haruhiro turned left, advancing towards where the river seemed to be. He soon ran into a cliff.

He called it a cliff, but it was only two, three meters to the bottom. It wouldn't be impossible to make his way down. There was a riverbed down there. The river was flowing just past there. It looked like they were drawing water from the river into their moat.

When he looked from near the river over to the moat, there was another watchtower. There was a bonfire lit atop it, and a lookout there, too. But this lookout was much smaller than the first one had been. It had a roly-poly body, only about as large as a human child. Still, its head was wrapped with cloth, just like the first. In terms of armaments, it also seemingly used a bow and arrow.

Haruhiro decided to designate this as Watchtower B, and the first as Watchtower A. He turned back to where Watchtower A was, proceeding along in the opposite direction.

The moat eventually began to curve. He could see a number of the buildings clearly. They were all one floor, and there were no more than ten or so of them. Eventually he came to another watchtower. Watchtower C. Watchtower C was big and sturdy. A gate. Watchtower C was built as part of a gate. There was a bridge extending out from that open gate. Made of wood, huh. It was solidly built. The bridge over the moat looked strong enough to bear the weight of a carriage.

There was a lookout on Watchtower C, too. This one wasn't sitting. It was standing. Unlike the lookouts of Watchtower A or B, this one had a strangely long and lanky physique.

There was something weird about those arms. Too many joints? It looked like it had two, maybe three elbows? Like the other lookouts, this one's head was wrapped with cloth, but it was protruding out from it at the very ends. Besides that, there was the tail. The lookout on Watchtower C had a tail.

At the very least, he could say the lookouts at Watchtower A and B and the one at Watchtower C belonged to different races. If Haruhiro used his common sense, it was the only possible conclusion.

Was the lookout at Watchtower C from the same race as the skeletal remains

Ranta had found? It did have a tail. The corpse had had eight fingers, too. What about the lookout? That remained to be seen. Haruhiro couldn't tell how many fingers it had.

The lookout of Watchtower C suddenly looked his way.

Have I been noticed? Haruhiro held his breath and remained still. If he panicked and tried to flee, that would make things worse.

The lookout took the bow that had been slung over its back, nocking an arrow. It drew back on the bowstring.

Oh, crap, he thought. I want to run away. I have to run away. No... Hold on. It's not certain yet that I've been found. Besides, it's fine. If it fires an arrow, it won't be too late to run the moment it does. Probably.

The lookout loosed up on the bowstring. It spun the unnocked arrow around. Then, as if to say, *Must have been my imagination*, it tilted its head to the side.

Yeah, that's right. It was just your imagination... okay? Haruhiro took a small breath, then he began moving.

That lookout was bad news. It was sharp. Had he made a noise? Haruhiro didn't think so. Besides, there was a constant clanging with a regular beat, so he should have been fine making a little noise. Still, the lookout of Watchtower C had detected something. He decided it was best to be careful.

He continued scouting. Passing by the bridge, he followed the curve of the moat. After confirming a Watchtower D and Watchtower E, he came upon a cliff. The riverbed was below.

In other words, this village was in a warped circle, surrounded by the moat and river.

In order to enter the village, they either had to cross the bridge, get over the moat, or swim through the river to reach the riverbed on the village's side.

It would be dangerous to swim through the river in the darkness. They could very well drown. They could probably manage to swim across the moat, but scaling the wall on the other side would prove troublesome.

That meant that, fundamentally, crossing the bridge was the only option. Of

course, if he tried to walk across openly, he'd probably be sniped by the lookout. Could they remove the lookout with Yume's bow or Shihoru's magic? Then what? Force their way in? The six of them? There were at least four other lookouts armed with bows, and there was no guarantee that there wasn't more.

Could they win? Or rather, was this a win-or-lose situation? It didn't feel like it. Haruhiro and the party's goal was to obtain water and food, that was all. If the party could demonstrate that they weren't hostile somehow, might the residents let them inside? Then, could Haruhiro and his party trade their possessions or money, whatever it took, for food and potable water? Was that impossible? Was it no good...?

Haruhiro took the same path back the way he had come, observing the village across the moat as he went.

He spotted a number of the residents. He was surprised. They weren't just people. No... there were some that weren't humanoid. That was the better way to put it.

The most intensely different had six insect-like arms, with furball-like lower bodies. Those ones had had their heads wrapped in something, too. Weren't the residents here a little too diverse...?

When he returned to his comrades and gave them the short version of what he'd seen, Ranta thumped his chest, snorting excitedly. "Leave it to me. I've got an idea."

"Kehe... I have a good feeling about this... Kehehehe... It feels Ranta's heading for the eternal slumber..."

"Hey, that doesn't sound like a good feeling to me at all, you know?" Ranta shot back. "Also, I've said this before, but if I get sent off to my eternal rest, you're gonna disappear too, got it, Zodiac-kun?"

"O dread knight... Ehe... Let us be embraced by Lord Skullhell together... Ehehe..."

"I-I'm thinking it's a bit early for that, yeah? Listen, um, I've got lots I still want to do... like playing with some boobies, and—Wait, what are you making me

say?!”

“Nobody’s making you say anything...” Haruhiro massaged his brow with his fingers.

“You just wanted to say ‘boobies,’” Yume said, and Haruhiro thought she was probably right.

“You’re the worst.” Merry practically spat the words at him.

Shihoru said something awfully harsh under her breath. “I hope Zodiac-kun’s right... about that prediction...”

“Hmph!” Ranta was undeterred. “Don’t think you mediocre people can hurt me with that level of petty slander. Well, just you watch. Soon enough, you’ll be getting down on your knees and begging me for forgiveness, I’m sure. I’ll play with your tits then. No complaints allowed. Oh, just the girls, I mean, of course.”

“...You’ve got one hell of a tough heart, Ranta-kun,” Kuzaku said.

“Damn straight I do, Kuzacky. My heart’s made out of diamond, okay? Now, all of you, follow me. I’ll teach you the one true way to handle this.”

It wasn’t like Haruhiro had an alternate idea. If it was a bust, they were just back to where they started. He decided to let Ranta handle it. So they all moved up close to the bridge.

Ranta put on his helmet, lowered his visor, and then told Haruhiro and the others, “You people wait here,” with a self-important tone.

“What’re you planning to do?” Naturally, Haruhiro was the one to ask that.

“It’s fine, so just shut up. If I’m right about this—”

“Kehe... This is you, Ranta... You must be wrong... Kehe... Kehehe...”

“We’ll find out soon, okay?” Ranta said, and then started walking.

No way, thought Haruhiro. Just to be on the safe side, he had the rest of their comrades get ready to flee. *You’re going? You’re seriously going there? That’s crazy, you know that? Are you that desperate?*

But Ranta was walking with an awful lot of confidence. He even started humming to himself as he went. Had he finally snapped?

Haruhiro and the others could only hold their breaths and watch over him in silence. Ranta had already gotten pretty close to the bridge. The lookout of Watchtower C noticed Ranta, drew its bow, and nocked an arrow. Even that moron Ranta would have to get the chills when he saw that.

He cringed—but he didn't stop. He kept walking.

Seriously? thought Haruhiro. *No, man, it's coming for you. The arrow. It's gonna come flying.*

"Okay, okay." It wasn't clear what he was thinking, but Ranta said that as he waved his hand.

He would be crossing the bridge soon. He finally stepped on to it.

The lookout lowered its bow.

"...No way," Haruhiro said, his mouth hanging open.

"Welcome, welcome." Ranta crossed the bridge laughing.

What good is you saying "welcome" going to do, man? Haruhiro thought indignantly. *Like, why are you okay? I don't get it.*

When Ranta had crossed over to the bridge without incident, he looked up to the lookout of Watchtower C.

"Ohh. Me. My. Friend. Friends? Comrades. Together. I bring them. Here. Now. You? Okay?"

The lookout tilted its head to the side. It didn't seem like it understood. Well, of course it wouldn't.

"Good." Despite that, Ranta gave the thumbs up. "Okay. My. Comrades. Together. Now. Okay, okay."

Then, leaving the clearly flummoxed lookout behind, Ranta came back to Haruhiro and the others in high spirits.

"There! How'd you like that?! I was right, huh! Bow down before me! Worship me! Also, you women, let me touch your boobs!"

"I'm never letting you touch them..." Shihoru said, covering herself with both arms.

“Ranta, you’d probably end up hurtin’ them if you did.” Maybe she just didn’t understand, but Yume occasionally said things that were slightly weird. Haruhiro wished she would be more aware of these things, but it was hard to caution her about it.

“But...” Merry tilted her head to the side. “Why? They seem to be pretty blatantly wary of outsiders.”

“It’s a mystery, for sure.” Kuzaku couldn’t seem to accept it, either.

“Could it be—” Just as Haruhiro was about to say it, Ranta cut him off.

“You moron! It’s my job to give the answer here! I had flash of inspiration! Don’t steal my thunder, Parupirorin!”

“Ehe... Your face... You hid your face... That’s why they let you in... Ehehe...”

“Zodiac-kun?! You’re gonna tell them that?! Hey?! I wanted to be the one to say it, you know?!” Ranta shouted.

In addition to the five lookouts, the residents Haruhiro had seen had all hidden their faces with cloth or something similar. Haruhiro had thought that strange, too, and it had caught his attention.

From there he came to the theory, “Covering your face is the condition for entering the village.” That was fine, but risking life and limb to test the idea... That was reckless.

Was it okay to let it slide because it had all turned out fine in the end? He worried over that a bit as leader. What should he do? He had an idea.

“Ranta.” Haruhiro rounded on him with a serious attitude. “It worked out, so it’s fine. But, still. What would you have done if it hadn’t? What would have happened? Did you think about that, even a little?”

“Huh? I don’t have time to think about that stuff, moron. Besides, I’ll have you know, Ranta-sama is never wrong.”

“You could have been in serious trouble. That’s what I’m trying to say here.”

“H-Hey, it’s my life, I can do what I want with it, okay? I’m a free man, you know...”

“Don’t say that in front of our comrades,” said Haruhiro. “If anything were to happen to you, everyone—even me—we wouldn’t be fine with that.”

“Shut uuuuuup! S-S-S-S-S-S-Stop that, you’re embarrassing me! I-I get it, okay?!”

“Then, from here on, promise you’ll be more careful.”

“F-Fine, I just have to do it, right? I-I’ll promise! There, that ought to be good enough!”

“You won’t do it again, right?” Haruhiro asked.

“I-I won’t!”

“Good.” Haruhiro quickly turned his back to Ranta.

Don’t laugh, he told himself now. I can’t crack up now. I just pulled off the “Passionate Leader” role. But, still, Ranta’s surprisingly weak to this stuff. It’s hilarious. No, no, that’s no good. If I think about how hilarious it is, I’m gonna end up laughing.

Haruhiro cleared his throat, then directed his comrades to cover their faces with something. Yume was staring off into space, while Merry and Kuzaku looked at him dubiously, and Shihoru looked down at the ground, probably suppressing a laugh. It looked like Shihoru could see through his act.

Kuzaku, like Ranta, covered his face with his helmet. Haruhiro covered his head with his cloak. It was worn and full of holes, so if he positioned it right, he could see. Yume, Shihoru, and Merry worked with towels and the like to fashion some masks. As for Zodiac-kun, depending on how you looked at it, the demon’s face might seem like it already was hidden. But it was questionable whether they’d see it that way. There was no way to be certain, so they had the demon vanish for the time being.

Now their odd-looking group was good to go. Was this really going to be okay? Haruhiro wasn’t confident, but the lookout on Watchtower C let him and the party through without even readying its bow. It seemed like they really would let them into the village if they covered their faces.

There were fourteen buildings inside the moat. They were of varying sizes,

but they were all single-floor buildings. There was a plaza in the center of the village, with something that resembled a well there. The massive humanoid creature sitting next to the well had to be a guard. It held a stupidly big hammer, with a bow and arrows slung over its back. Its face wasn't visible through its helmet.

They identified the source of the clanging noise. There were five buildings facing on to the central plaza. One of them had a large overhang on one side of its roof that was supported by pillars. Beneath that roof there were coals, or something burning red, and a large oven-like thing.

It was a furnace, apparently. There was an anvil, too. There was a humanoid creature there with a naked upper torso that was frighteningly swollen, a crooked back, a butt that stuck out, and short legs. It had fixed a bar of iron to the anvil, and it was banging on it. That was the source of the clanging.

"They have a blacksmith..." Haruhiro murmured.

The many weapons and armor that must have been forged or repaired by that bizarre smith either hung from the wall of the building or were leaning against it.

The smith had something like bandages wrapped around its face. But the crimson eyes that made it look like it was crying blood, and the mouth where hard-looking, mortar-like teeth were lined up without any gaps, were both exposed.

On closer inspection, it wasn't just the smithy. The other four buildings facing on to the plaza had no small selection of goods on display, either under their eaves or inside the building.

The building next to the smithy carried what looked like clothing and bags. The completed ones were displayed on shelves or stacked on the table. Sitting on a chair next to the table, there was a thing shaped like a flattened egg. It had two arms (?) sticking out of it, and it wore a hat, so maybe it was a living creature. That might be the owner of the clothing and bag shop.

Across the plaza from the smithy was another building, or a shed rather. That shed had either had the wall facing the plaza removed, or there had never been one there in the first place. Either way, the inside was clearly visible.

The wall of the shed was completely covered with bags with holes in them, along with more elaborate masks and veils, as well what looked like helmets. In the center of the shed sat a humanoid creature that was thin and emaciated like a dried up, dead tree. The owner of the mask shop had six arms, and its more than thirty fingers were interwoven in complicated patterns in front of its chest. The face covering that he or she was wearing, as befitted the owner of such a shop, was a cool, shining golden helmet that was like an art piece.

Next to the mask shop, the building across from the clothing and bag shop was constructed similarly. However, it was about twice the size. It was clear at a glance what this one was. It was a grocery store. The meat of four-legged beasts and birds stripped of their skin hung from the ceiling, while bundles of some sort of plant were left on a shelf, along with what looked like berries. The already-cooked dumplings and fried skewers caught Haruhiro's attention.

In front of the store there was a creature best described as a man-sized crab. It was stirring the contents of a pot that was being heated over a stove with a ladle. The giant crab that ran the grocery store was wearing a mask, too, but its two eye stalks were sticking out of it completely, so it was questionable whether its face was actually hidden.

The building next to the grocer's had miscellaneous goods scattered around randomly, all on display in a variety of different ways. It might have been a general store. Haruhiro didn't see a creature running the place anywhere. It must have been inside.

"What do you think?" Ranta snorted, puffing up his chest with pride. "Quite the village, huh?"

"...What are you acting proud for?" Shihoru showered Ranta with a look of seething hatred. Even with her face hidden, it was easy to imagine the expression she was wearing right now.

"It's gotta be 'cause he's an idiot," Yume said, sighing with exasperation.

Merry was looking around restlessly. "We're being ignored...?"

"Um..." Kuzaku waved to the well guard. "H-Hey there."

The giant guard adjusted its grip on its giant hammer. Kuzaku gulped and took

a half step backward, but that was the only real reaction the guard gave him. Not only did it give him no response, it didn't even look in Kuzaku's direction. Ignored.

There were actually some residents taking a leisurely stroll nearby, but they didn't even give Haruhiro and the others a second glance. They were being completely ignored.

Haruhiro crossed his arms, "Hmm..." he groaned. What to do?

"Don't just groan in thought." Ranta kicked the ground with his heel. "Do something, leader. Don't forget, it's for times like this that I let a loser like you be the leader."

"You think you can get away with talking to me like that, Ranta?"

"If you don't like it, then do something brilliant to shut me up."

Hm, Backstab or Spider? If I were to going to snuff Ranta and shut him up for good, which skill would be better?

For a moment, Haruhiro seriously considered the question, but he had more important things to do than dispose of that smelly piece of trash. There was water and food right there. They had to get their hands on some, no matter what.

Haruhiro cleared his throat, then tried approaching the well. The well's guard didn't move. But, still, it was huge. Even seated, its head was higher than Kuzaku's, and he was 190 centimeters tall. That was no joke. It was scary.

Even so, Haruhiro worked up his courage and walked forward. The well was five meters away. Four meters. Three meters. Any further and he'd be within the guard's reach. If the guard felt like it, it could probably kill Haruhiro in a single blow as it rose.

It was hard to breathe. He felt like his stomach might jump up out of his mouth. Well, not that it did. He'd be shocked if that happened.

When he shook off his fear and hesitation and took a step forward, the guard suddenly half rose from its seat.

"Eek!"

“Meowha?!”

“...!”

There were screams, but not from Haruhiro, from the girls. Haruhiro was scared so stiff, he couldn't even utter a sound.

Oh... Oh... O-O-O-O-Oh, crap! A-Am I... gonna... get killed...?

“I-I-I'll give you a decent burial... Maybe?” Ranta whispered.

“Come on, let's at least do that much for him...” Kuzaku retorted.

Wait, wait, wait? Before you bury me, isn't there something you should do first...?

“P-Please.” Haruhiro suddenly put his hands up. His body, it moved. His voice, it came out.

Come on, “Please,” really? I'm not Ranta.

Even as he was on the verge of tears, Haruhiro kept his left hand in the air while using his right to point back and forth between the well and his own throat. “W-Water. I want drink. Water. Throat, dry. Um, we are travelers. Water, want... You... understand? Water, water! Could you... let us drink some? Water. Well water!”

The guard remained half-risen, not budging.

It was a bucket well. There were two posts on either side of the well, and there was a beam that went between them. There was a pulley on the beam, and a pail hanging from a rope that went over it.

The firelight from a torch attached to one of the posts illuminated the monster-like guard. “Like”? No, no matter how you looked at it, the guard was a monster. Those arms, they were definitely thicker than a person. It was way too big. It was crazy. Way too crazy.

“Let us... have... a drink...” Haruhiro gritted his teeth and shook his head. *Don't give in. You can't. Lives are at stake here, seriously.* “Water! Water please! Please, water! Give us water! Come on, we need water, okay?! Doesn't everyone?! Water...!”

The guard moved its left hand. In that instant, Haruhiro braced himself for death. But it wasn't its right hand which held the hammer that it had moved. It extended its left hand to Haruhiro. It was like it was asking for something.

"Mo—!" Ranta shouted. "Money, Haruhiro! Money! Pay up! Hurry!"

Oh, shut up, stupid Ranta, I can figure that out without you telling me.

Haruhiro hurriedly pulled out a number of silver coins. He was so terrified that he thought his heart might give out, but he moved up closer to the guard, laying the silver coins in its hand. The guard brought its left hand up to its face, scrutinizing the silver coins in the palm of its hand. Then, immediately—it dropped them right there.

Haruhiro nearly fainted.

This time, I'm finished for sure, he thought. I goofed. I done goofed. I goofed bad.

"The black one...!" Shihoru shouted, and Haruhiro was a little proud of himself for immediately understanding what she meant. Though Shihoru was the greatest just for coming up with the idea.

"H-H-H-Here!" Haruhiro pulled out the black coin that the corpse with the tail had carried and showed it to the guard. "There, will that do?! Well?! Is this good?!"

The guard extended its left hand again. With quivering hands, Haruhiro placed the black coin there.

When the guard gripped the black coin, it gestured at him with his chin, saying something that sounded like, "Ua, goh."

What does that mean? Ua, goh? Uagoh...?

Upper jaw?

Is that wrong? It's wrong—I think...?

"Yahoo!" Ranta rushed over to the well and lowered the pail. "Water, water!"

"No, buddy..." Haruhiro felt the blood drain from his face as he looked to the guard.

He's... not mad? It's cool? We can use the well, then...? Apparently, yes. The moment Haruhiro thought that, relief and joy burst forth from inside him, and the next thing he knew, he was gulping down water directly from the bucket.

“Water is goooooooooooooooooooooood...” he groaned.

No doubt about it. This was the best water he'd ever had. To think that water could taste this great. What bliss. It made him glad he was born. Glad to be alive.

They each took turns drinking from the pail, and they had each taken three or four turns by now, but no one had said they'd had enough. They could drink as much as they wanted.

Well, there might be an actual limit, so first Shihoru, then Merry, Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Yume, and Ranta stopped drinking in that order.

Ranta collapsed to the ground, rolling onto his back. “I-It hurts. I drank too much...”

“Ohh,” Yume crouched down, rubbing her belly. “Yume's never been full of water before. Her belly's all bloaty...”

“You got full. On water.” Kuzaku held a hand to his mouth.

Come to think of it, Ranta and Kuzaku had both raised their visors. Their faces were visible. Was that okay? The guard wasn't saying anything, so it apparently wasn't a problem, but it made Haruhiro uneasy.

“Maybe, if we have that money...” Shihoru glanced towards the grocery store.

“You mean that's the currency in this place?” Merry was rubbing Yume's back.

Haruhiro looked from the smithy to the clothing and bag store to the mask store to the grocery store to the general store. If that was true, and they could just figure out how to get more of those coins, they could survive for the time being, at least.

3. The Forbidden Bath



When the six of them pooled all the money they had on them, they had 1 gold, 87 silver, and 64 copper. When it came to other possessions, all they had were their personal effects.

They went around showing these to the proprietors of the clothing and bag store, the mask store, and the grocery store, but those people showed no interest and ignored them.

The blacksmith was in the middle of a job, so they didn't want to disturb it, or more like they were afraid it'd kill them if they did.

They thought the proprietor of the general store was probably inside, so they knocked on the door. They knocked three times and got no response, so they gave up.

It seemed like it would be difficult to acquire more of the black coins inside the settlement. That would be making it too easy. The stomachs they had tricked into thinking they were full with water were already back to grumbling, and they felt a sense of crisis. Even if it was just one or two, they would have to find more of the black coins outside.

Haruhiro clutched his empty stomach as they left the village. Their objective, it went without saying, was to find black coins. They discussed their plan.

It was dangerous, or rather they didn't know whether it was dangerous or not, so they wouldn't go too far afield. While making a mental map of the area with the village at its center, they expanded their range of operations little by little.

First they crossed the bridge and tried going straight. They ran into a forest after going about one hundred meters. They found it was dense with tall,

whitish, twisted plants that were probably trees. Making their way through it didn't seem like it was going to be easy. They couldn't keep going.

They turned back, traveling around the moat and descending the low cliff. The riverbed was mostly sand. It was strangely warm.

Haruhiro and the others went up to the riverside. The river looked deep, and its current swift.

Haruhiro hesitantly dipped his hand into the pure black water. He opened his eyes wide with surprise. "...It's lukewarm. This river."

"Seriously?" Ranta took off his shoes and socks, stepping into the river barefoot. "Whoa! You were serious! It's not warm, but it's lukewarm! We could use this in place of a bath!"

"A bath..." Shihoru mumbled absently. "I want to take... a bath..."

"That's right..." Merry looked up into the sky and sighed. "A bath..."

Yume let out a silly laugh. "Bathin' would probably feel real good, huh."

"Yeah..." Kuzaku nodded. "Everyone smells pretty awful. Myself included, I'm sure."

"Let's go in!" Ranta gave them a thumbs up. "Everyone together! I mean, where's the harm, just this one time? Nothing like getting naked together to build camaraderie, they say! I mean, it's super dark! No one's gonna see much! Gehehehehehehehe!"

"That's never gonna fly, and you know it." Haruhiro felt a strong urge to clobber Ranta, but he didn't want to needlessly waste stamina. "Sorry, but let's save it for later. We need to find some black coins and get something to eat. The bath can come after that. We'll check that it's safe, and the guys and girls will take turns bathing separately."

"Screw you, Haruhiro! I'm against it! Against, against, against! Agaiiiinst!" Ranta made a whole lot of noise, but the rest of their comrades agreed with Haruhiro.

"—Whuh?" Yume, who had still been splashing in the water along the riverbank, reluctant to leave, picked something up. "Oh? What's this? It was

buried in the... sand? It's round and—"

Haruhiro took it from Yume. "...It's a black coin."

"There could be more, right?!" Ranta got down on all fours and started to search for black coins with such vigor that it looked like he might take off swimming. "Get searching! All of you! Let me say, though, what's yours is mine, and what's mine is, of course, mine, too!"

"Save the sleep talk for when you're asleep, man." Even as he grumbled, Haruhiro began feeling around for black coins.

Everyone was pretty—no, very—serious about it.

Eventually the flame-like light from the distant ridge vanished completely, and the area was locked in perfect darkness. They weren't far from the village, and they had heard the banging of the blacksmith's hammer not that long ago, but now that had completely died out.

It was night. How long had they been searching for black coins? Haruhiro wasn't entirely sure, but regardless, it was night now.

"That was it! We never found another one!" Ranta punched the water.

"I guess it's just not that easy..." Kuzaku was sitting down in the riverbed.

"A-Anyway..." Shihoru squeezed the water out of the hem of her soaked robe. "We could head back, see if we can buy food with that one coin..."

"That's true." Yume sounded like she might be crying a bit. "Yume's gettin' mighty hungry, and it's been makin' her sad..."

"It might buy more than we think, after all." Merry tried to console them, which was a little unusual for her.

"Yeah, you're right..." Ranta hung his head. He didn't have much energy, and it was hard to blame him for that.

"Let's do that... I guess..." Haruhiro said languidly, then told himself, *No, no, that's not good enough*. A leader couldn't afford to let his spirits get down like that. "L-Let's go, guys! It's chow time!"

However, even climbing the two-meter cliff on their way back proved a

difficult task. They made it back to the bridge on unsteady feet, and were shocked by what they found.

Watchtower C, on the other side of the bridge, was for all practical purposes a gate. If they couldn't pass through that gate, they wouldn't be able to enter the village. The gate that had been open just a little while earlier was now closed, for some reason.

"Wh... Why?" Haruhiro pressed a fist against his forehead. "Because it's night?"

"Who cares!" Ranta lowered his visor and started to run across the bridge.

"H-Hey!" Haruhiro didn't even have to stop him.

The lookout on Watchtower C nocked an arrow to its bow. When it drew a bead on him, Ranta did more than just come to a sudden stop. He launched into an incredible jumping kowtow.

"Sorry! Don't shoot, don't shoot! I'm begging you, please, don't shoot me!"

It worked in his favor, maybe. While the lookout didn't lower its bow, it also didn't fire. Ranta backed away with his head still bowed, eventually making it to where Haruhiro and the others were.

"You piece of crap! You balding idiot! I nearly died there, dammit!"

"Hey, don't snap at me..." Haruhiro felt dizzy. He felt so weak from hunger that it was hard to talk at all. "We'll have to wait for the gate to open... I guess. Or, since it feels silly to just wait, do you want to go look for black coins? No, that's not happening... None of us are up for that..."

They didn't have the willpower left to move. Or the stamina. Haruhiro and the others sat or lay down where they were. Even as they were collapsed there, the feeling of starvation relentlessly assaulted them. However, they could do nothing but sit there and take it. Even if they started nodding off, the intense hunger would wake them back up.

It made them want to lash out at someone. While they were fighting off that urge, their consciousness would grow faint again. That shallow slumber would then be easily broken by aching hunger.

The three girls stuck together, sleeping and then getting back up.

Yume rubbed Shihoru's head. "So hungry..." she mumbled. "Hey, Shihoru, she'll only take a little, so can Yume eat you?"

"If you don't mind me eating you, too..."

"Ohhhhh," Yume moaned. "If it means she can have some Shihoru, maybe Yume doesn't mind bein' eaten..."

"You want to try eating each other...?" Shihoru mumbled.

"That sounds good... Shihoru, you're lookin' tasty, after all..."

"Um, do you mind if I eat, too...?" Merry ventured.

"If you do, then let us eat you, too, Merry," Yume said.

"Sure... Eat me... If it lets me eat, I'll do anything at this point..."

"—Hah." Ranta rolled into a ball like some sort of dead maggot. "What're you damn women talking about? Dammit... I'm jealous... Seriously, seriously..."

Kuzaku was lying on his back with his arms and legs spread out, chanting something. "She shells sea shells by the she shore... Peter Piper picked a pick of pippled peppers... How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck wood chuck wood..."

"Well, I guess we're not at our limit yet..." Haruhiro smiled weakly. "We're not at our limit, or what's a limit, a limit... libit... ribbit... heheh..."

In this world of endless darkness, it was hard to believe the morning would come again, but eventually it did.

Even before the light peeked out from behind the ridge, there came an ominous bellowing, and the lookout of Watchtower C opened the gate from the inside. Immediately afterwards, the distant ridge lit up.

Haruhiro and the others all leapt to their feet, rushing to be the first across the bridge. The blacksmith hadn't gone to work yet, but the pot in the grocery store was already steaming. Haruhiro offered the black coin to the giant crab proprietor that was stirring the pot with a ladle. The giant crab looked back and forth from the coin to Haruhiro and the others with the eyes that stuck out

from behind its mask.

“Give us something to eat!” Haruhiro immediately began pleading. “We’re starving to death! We’ll take anything, seriously, anything, so long as it’s edible!”

The giant crab took out six bowls made of wood or something, and scooped the contents of the pot, stew, or something like it, into them.

Haruhiro and the others all said their thanks and then took their bowls. It would have been nice to have some spoons, but they didn’t need them.

Haruhiro took a sip of the thick, hot, blackish stew. He didn’t quite understand the taste. But, it was so good he could die. When he looked around, everyone else was hungrily wolfing down their stew.

We’re so happy, Haruhiro thought from the bottom of his heart. We’re happy. We’re happy, too happy. It’s mind-numbing, like there’s essence of glee leaking out through every pore of our bodies. We’re damn happy.

He had slurped the thick broth down in no time flat. However, he still wasn’t done. There were still the solid ingredients. Haruhiro poked the ingredients at the bottom of his bowl.

“Ick?!” he cried out in surprise.

After all, those ingredients, they clearly looked like centipedes. *These are... bugs... aren’t they?*



“Gahahah! A man’s food is his castle!” Ranta said something incomprehensible, then boldly tossed those bugs into his mouth and chewed. “—Guwaaeh?! Eughhhh?!”

They were apparently bitter. Ranta spat the bugs out. It was only to be expected, really. They looked pretty disgusting. It was probably best not to eat them. But... It wasn’t enough. Honestly, this was far from enough to fill them up.

Haruhiro looked to the giant crab. When he did, the giant crab offered him some sort of fried meat skewer. Faith began to take root in Haruhiro’s heart. His god was a giant crab that ran a grocery store.

Even as Haruhiro choked back tears, he took the meat skewer with gratitude, so much gratitude. He chomped into it before even thinking, *Is this meat safe?* It was cold, hard, and it seemed to be smoked rather than fried, but it wasn’t bad. It was dry and hard to swallow, but it released more and more flavor as he chewed it. This seemed like it would keep him feeling full for a while.

The giant crab gave each of the others one of the smoked meat skewers, too. That meant a black coin was worth at least six bowls of bug soup and six skewers of smoked mystery meat.

With their hunger satisfied, now they wanted water. However, they would likely need another black coin to use the well again. They would have to do without for now, and boil the river water later. While Haruhiro was worrying about it, that idiot Ranta skipped right over to the well, lowered the bucket, pulled up a pail of water, and drank it greedily. The well’s guard didn’t move.

—*Huh? That’s okay?*

When Ranta was done, Haruhiro hesitantly drank some of the water himself. The well guard really wasn’t going to do anything to him. Because they’d paid the day before? If one black coin was good for six bowls of bug stew and six skewers of smoked meat, maybe one black coin for water for six people had been overpaying. So, that was why it was letting them drink again today... maybe?

Whatever the case, once they all rehydrated themselves, they finally started

to feel like themselves again. No, not yet.

“Um, Haruhiro-kun...” Shihoru raised her hand. “I’d like to take a bath now...”

He couldn’t bring himself to say *We have bigger concerns*.

Well, Haruhiro reasoned, we can probably think about how to get more black coins while we’re getting ready to bathe and while we’re bathing. I’m sure we can. Once we’re feeling properly refreshed, something might come to mind, after all. Yeah. A bath. Let’s take a bath.

Haruhiro and the party left the village and took an express trip to the riverbed. Maybe they didn’t need to be in such a rush, but they couldn’t help themselves.

First, they dug a hole near the river. Then, they connected the hole to the river with a channel. Once the hole filled with river water, they closed off the channel. It was decided that the girls would go first, then the guys. While the girls were in the bath, the guys waited somewhere at a distance.

The hole they were using as a tub was a meter and a half across, with a depth of about one meter. The river water only about body temperature, but that was way better than it being cold. They held up a lantern to it, and it wasn’t cloudy, and didn’t smell. Their work went as planned, without interruption, and the lukewarm open-air bath was complete.

“Well, we’ll be off over there,” Haruhiro said to the girls.

Haruhiro, Ranta, and Kuzaku left Yume, Shihoru, and Merry behind as they went about twenty meters away from the open-air bath. Right next to the cliff. Even when the sun rose, or rather the flames rose, this world was still dark. There was no way they could see the girls from here, so this was probably far enough.

Still, it was strange. Ranta was being oddly quiet.

No. He had been being quiet.

“Well, time to begin the operation, am I right?” Ranta asked.

“I thought so...” Haruhiro sighed. How was he going to stop this utter sleazeball?

Fortunately, Haruhiro didn't have to do a thing. That was because Kuzaku suddenly held him down.

"Not gonna let you do that."

"Ow! Ow, ow! Wait, dammit, Kuzacky! What're you doing?! Not the joints, man, seriously, go easy on the joints! That hurts, dammit! Let go of me, you big idiot!"

"Nah, you're pretty strong yourself, Ranta-kun. If I don't go this far, you'll get away."

"You're breaking my arm! My shoulder! You'll burst my organs! What're you gonna do if I die, huh?! You moron!"

"You won't die that easily, Ranta-kun. This's fine."

"It's not fine, it's not fine, it's not fine. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying. Let go, let go, let go."

"I can tell you're making it sound worse than it is, y'know."

"...Dammit, you're too damn uppity, Kuzacky! Can't you show your seniors the proper respect?!"

"I do. I actually have a fair bit of respect for you, as a matter of fact."

"Then let go! Nuuuude! I'm gonna see the girls nude! Boobs! I have a disease that'll kill me if I don't see some naked boobs! Seriously, man, I'm not lying here!"

"...Well, there goes some of that respect," Kuzaku told him. "That was a little much."

Ranta isn't a person deserving of any respect, so I think that's just fine, thought Haruhiro. Still, Kuzaku sure was quick to act. Is it that? His thing with Merry? Gotta be. He doesn't want her to be seen. She's his... what? Girlfriend? Lover? Same difference. He doesn't want to let other men see a person he's in that sort of relationship with naked. That's how it is. Probably. It's natural to feel that way.

Even Haruhiro could understand that much.

I'm still a virgin, though, y'know? What about Kuzaku? Do you think they're already—already doing it...? Like, you know?

Haruhiro sat down on the ground and covered his face with his hands. What was he even thinking about? It was stupid. What did it even matter? He didn't have time for this.

That's right. He really didn't have time for it.

Black coins. How could they find them? From corpses, and from the riverbed. Methods that relied on chance like that weren't good. Was there a more certain way? If they had to earn money, could they work? Like, by doing some sort of labor for the residents of that village? Would that be doable? Even without speaking their language? It didn't seem like it.

Money. Money, huh. The black coins were money. Were they the currency of that village? If they were, there was a cash economy—but, could a system where cash was exchanged for goods be practical for just one tiny village like that? There were maybe fifty of them there at most. Every one of the stores had had a fairly wide selection of goods. Wasn't that a little too much for a village of fifty? Did they have other customers? Others like Haruhiro and the party...?

"Eek!" They heard someone's voice.

Not just a voice. A scream.

"Hey!" Ranta knocked Kuzaku off of him.

Kuzaku quickly jumped to his feet. "Merry... san?!"

Haruhiro started running as soon as he was on his feet. "Merry?! Yume?! Shihoru?!"

"Nu-chah...!"

That was Yume's battle cry. She was fighting back? Against what? An enemy?

There was a violent splashing.

"Wah...!"

Was that Shihoru's voice? Like, she tried to get away, then fell in the river, or

something?

“Hah!”

That was Merry. Merry’s voice. It sounds like she’s fighting.

“W-We’ll do our best not to see anything!” Haruhiro drew his dagger and sap. But, yeah, he did kind of think this wasn’t the time to worry about what they might or might not see.

He raced over as fast as he could. He could make out vague outlines. It looked like Yume and Merry were moving around with their weapons, like he had thought. They were out of the bath. Where was Shihoru? The river? Was that the enemy?

At first, Haruhiro thought it was a lizard or something. Its posture was low, like it was crawling. It was fast. It quickly jumped left and right, dodging Yume and Merry’s attacks. It was about the size of a person.

Before he could think anything, Haruhiro moved. He grappled his enemy from behind. Spider.

It wasn’t a lizard. This thing was all hairy. Whatever. He went to bury his dagger in the side of its neck, but the enemy struggled wildly.

It leapt. *Boing*, upwards on a diagonal. Up high.

“Whoa...!” Haruhiro cried, instinctively clinging to the enemy.

Oh, crap. The enemy bent backwards in midair. The way things were now, it was going to land on its back. Haruhiro was clinging to that back, which meant—Haruhiro was going to get smashed into the ground, wasn’t he?

When he tried to get away, the enemy wrapped itself around him. There was an unpleasant noise. The impact hit almost his entire body. He couldn’t breathe. His head was spinning.

The enemy leapt away from Haruhiro. Then it immediately attacked. Haruhiro got both of his arms up trying to protect his neck and face. He had to at least avoid dying, somehow.

“Gahhh!” Kuzaku jumped out, trying to hit the enemy with his longsword.

The enemy leapt straight backwards, then ran.

“There you are!” Ranta ran over, slashing the enemy.

Nice teamwork, thought Haruhiro, but it was questionable if he could really afford to be taking it easy and mentally praising his comrades.

He tried to get up. No good. Even just turning on his side hurt. All over.

I feel like I’m gonna puke. Pathetic. I was careless. I lost my head. Why couldn’t I stay calm? It’s frustrating. How embarrassing. What am I, a newbie? That was a rookie mistake. No excuse for it. It hurts...

Kuzaku and Ranta were chasing the enemy around. Merry and Yume were rushing over to him.

“Haru?!” Merry shouted.

“Haru-kun!” Yume cried.

No, that’s great, but it’s really not. I mean, you two are naked, aren’t you? It was too dark to see any details, but he still felt bad about it. Haruhiro closed his eyes, figuring it was the least he could do.

“Where’s... Shihoru...?” he rasped out.

“Meow?! That’s right! Shihoru! Where are you, Shihoru?! You okay?!”

“I-I-I’m j-j-just fine...” Shihoru responded, which was enough for Haruhiro to feel deeply relieved.

But it was still too early to relax, wasn’t it? Like, this wasn’t a situation where they could.

“Haru! I’ll use my magic now!” Merry cried.

“No, you can’t do that... I mean, light magic... gives off light... Before you do that... put some clothes on...”

“Is this really the time to be saying that?!” Merry got mad at him.

I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.

“Merry-san, here, clothes!” Kuzaku came back, throwing Merry’s clothes at her.

“I don’t really care!” Merry yelled, but she still threw on what she could quickly. Then she started treating Haruhiro.

“Dammiiiiit!” Ranta shouted. “It got away from us, you idiot!”

“Stupid Ranta, don’t come over here!” Yume hollered.

“Oh, shut up! Like I’d go out of my way to see your tiny tits!”

“Shihoru’s here, too, y’know!”

“Of course I wanna see hers! I’d love to stare at them, by all means! Gwehehehehe!”

“Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold it, hold it, Shihoru! No magic! That’s the Thunderstorm spell, isn’t it?! If I eat one of those, I’ll be toast!”

Haruhiro kept his eyes squeezed tight.

If I open them, I might see all sorts of stuff, y’know. I mean, Merry’s close. She’s close enough that I can feel part of her body touching me. I won’t look, though. I swear I won’t, okay? I feel so ashamed of myself for everything, I want to cry.

Still, can’t we even take a bath in peace? Man, this is tough...

4. U Naa



Light magic and dark magic were both usable. However, their effects and duration had been reduced to about one third of what they usually were, and not only did it take more than double the usual magical power to cast them, it seemed that doing so was incredibly exhausting to both the mind and body.

Thanks to that, Protection was so inefficient that it was practically unusable. Even with the healing-type spells, seven castings of Cure, four of Heal, or even one of Sacrament were enough to drain Merry’s magical power completely.

They decided to have Ranta use Demon Call to summon Zodiac-kun as often as possible. Ranta was a terrible dread knight who couldn’t make effective use of his dark magic anyway. Besides, Zodiac-kun was somewhat useful just by being around.

Haruhiro and the party named the village where the well was Well Village and the river with the lukewarm water Lukewarm River. The cardinal directions were unclear, but going on the theory that the Lukewarm River ran north to south, they decided that upstream would be north and downstream would be south. In the daytime, the fire would rise, and the eastern sky where the burning ridge was would grow a little brighter. It didn’t seem like they could cross the Lukewarm River, so for the time being, they would have to search to the west of it.

There was a forest that spread out to the west of Well Village. What about to the south? It seemed there were aggressive enemies in the riverbed, so they decided to climb the cliff and try going south from there.

“We’re... how far do you figure from Well Town?” Kuzaku turned back and looked.

“Like one kilometer?” Yume let out a strange *mnngh* sound as she thought

about it. “Maybe around that?”

“Tch.” Ranta clicked his tongue and stamped his feet a few times. “Damn, it’s hard to walk like this. It’s so squishy! What the hell is with this stuff?! Is it trying to harass me?!”

“Ehehe... Ranta... Your very existence is a form of harassment... Ehe... Eehehehe...”

“Hey, Zodiac-kun, what was that supposed to mean, huh?!”

“B-But, this might be kind of exhausting...” Shihoru was using her staff to support herself as she walked.

“You okay?” Merry asked. “Shihoru, if you need to, you can hold onto me for support.”

“Thanks, Merry... But then if I tripped, I’d take you down with me...”

“If it happens, it happens.” Merry looked like she was smiling, just a little.

Haruhiro smiled slightly, too.

No, a worthless leader who’s just screwed up has no right to smile. Still, it looks like Merry, Shihoru, and Yume are getting along great now. I couldn’t be happier for them.

Merry was a bit contrary when we first met, but I hear she was a cheerful person with a likable personality before. Blessed with good looks, takes her work as a priest seriously, has a good personality—what kind of perfect superwoman is she? As a comrade, and as a friend, I couldn’t ask for more. She’s pretty much ideal. As a leader, I’m happy. Though, having a girlfriend like that, I’m sure Kuzaku must be even happier...

“The area south of Well Village is a swamp, huh.” Haruhiro stifled a sigh that nearly escaped, squinting. “Looks like it goes on like this for a while...”

“It’s tough to walk in, sure, but it’s not all bad, y’know?” Yume said. “The surface here, it makes sounds. It goes squick, squick. So, if somethin’s comin’, you’ll know right away, huh?”

“Dammit, Yume,” Ranta complained. “Even with those tiny tits of yours, there you go, saying something that sounds useful!”

“Stop callin’ them tiny all the time!” Yume screamed.

There is something to what Yume said, thought Haruhiro. It’s true, it’s easy to stay alert here. For now, I want to expand our range, so let’s try going a bit further.

With that decided, they went another three hundred meters or so, but at that point the ground wasn’t just muddy, there were puddles and it felt like their feet were going to get stuck. The water was maybe about five centimeters deep at most, but there were soft spots and hard spots in the bottom, which made it worse. Actually...

“Hey, isn’t there something buried here?” Haruhiro asked.

“Treasure, huh!” Ranta immediately crouched down and thrust his hands into the mud. “...Oh? There is. There’s something. This is—”

“Should we shine a light on it?” Yume asked, to which Haruhiro nodded. “Oof.” Yume pulled out a lantern and lit it.

“Here.” Ranta brought what he had pulled out up to Yume’s lantern. It was a whitish, rod-shaped object.

Haruhiro immediately clued in. It was pretty clear what it was.

“A bone...?”

“There’re a whole bunch of them,” Ranta said. “Do you think the whole place could be littered with corpses?”

Zodiac-kun cackled. “Uhe... Ranta... You’ll turn to bones here, too... Uhehe... Uhehehehe...”

“Don’t say ominous stuff like that! Dammit, Zodiac-kun!”

“Let’s look.” Haruhiro made up his mind and nodded. “Well, I’m not that keen on it, but it might not just be bones—we might find their stuff, too. There could be black coins. Right now, we need those badly.”

There were no objections. Unlike with the water in the Lukewarm River, the water in the puddles here was chilly. When they were crouching in it, it could be downright cold. It wasn’t easy work, but compared to starvation and dehydration, it was nothing.

Eventually...

“Ah...!” Shihoru gulped as she lifted something up. “A black coin!”

“Oh, ho!” Ranta slapped Shihoru on the back. “Nice! Well done, Shihoru!”

“...Don’t take advantage of the situation to touch me.”

“No way?! You’re snapping at me now?! Seriously?! It’s not the time for that, is it?! Aren’t you happy?!”

“Kehehe... Ranta... Your existence ruins everything... Kehehehehe...”

“If my very existence is the problem, there’s no room for fixing that, you know?! Just saying!” Ranta yelled.

The discoveries continued after that. There was more than just black coins. They found two short, unrusted swords, one longsword, one metallic, mask-like thing, as well as four black coins.

“Hmm...” Ranta scrutinized the longsword before handing it to Kuzaku. “You hold onto this one, Kuzacky. It looks pretty good, and we can probably use it with some sharpening, but it’s too plain for me. A bit too long, too. Besides, my Lightning Sword Dolphin’s numbing effect hasn’t run out yet.”

“...Thanks.”

“The two short swords go to Haruhiro,” Ranta went on.

“Kehe... Ranta’s acting all important... Die, you blowhard... Kehehe...”

“Hey, Zodiac-kun?! Could you stop dissing me all the time, like it’s the natural thing to do?!”

“Hmm,” Haruhiro said, examining the short swords. “Nah, I think one’s enough for me. How about you take the other one, Yume? The slightly bigger one is about the size of your machete.”

“Meow. Now that you mention it, it is, huh? Well then, maybe Yume’ll take it.”

“How about the mask?” Merry tried putting it on. “—Oh. A perfect fit.”

It was made to look like some sort of creature. Not a human. It didn’t look like any creature Haruhiro knew, but if he was pushed to name one... an ape,

maybe? It looked kind of silly, with a funny-looking shape to it.

“I-It suits you... really,” Shihoru said, struggling to keep her voice level.

“Bwah!” Ranta burst out laughing and pointed at Merry. “It does, it does! It’s the best! A masterpiece! That one goes to Merry! Decided!”

“I-I don’t want it!” Merry took the mask off, trying to hand it to someone else, but everyone cruelly refused to take it from her. “I really don’t want it, okay?! I was just trying it on!”

Haruhiro, for some reason, he wasn’t sure why, looked to Kuzaku.

No, the why is obvious. It’s like, Kuzaku, man, aren’t you going to help her? How can I not think that? When something like this is happening, really. After all, the two of them were, well... You know?

Kuzaku was the first to break eye contact, looking down. It looked like he felt awkward.

Why? Ohh. I see. They haven’t told the rest of their comrades about their relationship. Because they’re hiding it? That’s why, even at times like this, it makes it hard for him to be obvious about standing up for her.

It’s fine. No need to hide it. Why not just open up about it already? This is kind of a pain. If you’d just do that, I’d feel a lot better about it, too.

But then, now’s not really the time to announce it. If they suddenly went, “Hey, guys, guess what,” no one would know how to react.

Even as Haruhiro thought about that, Yume offered to take the mask from Merry.

“In that case, maybe Yume’ll take it? It’d be easier havin’ a mask when we go back to Well Village. This one’s not cute, but maybe when she gets used to it, she’ll start thinkin’ it’s cute.”

“Um... about these black coins...” Shihoru picked up one of the four black coins resting in the palm of her hand and showed it to the rest of the group. “There’s a slight difference in their sizes. This one is big, but the other three are much smaller. The stuff written on them? It looks like the letters are slightly different...”

“Whoo.” Yume held the lantern up closer. “You’re right. It’s that much bigger, huh.”

Haruhiro compared the one Shihoru was holding up to the three on her palm. “You think the valuation is different? Like how silver and copper are? But the material’s the same here. What were the first two we found like? Hmm, I don’t remember...”

“Come on, you should at least remember that much.” Ranta snorted. “Well, not like I do, though!”

“Kehehe... Because your head’s empty... Kehe... Kehehe... You’ll be embraced by Skullhell soon...” Zodiac-kun suddenly lowered its voice. “It won’t be long now... Kehehehehe...”

“Hey, Haruhiro.” Ranta gestured with his chin.

“...Yeah.” Haruhiro bent his knee, lowering his center of gravity. “I know.”

Were all dread knights’ demons like this? Haruhiro, being a thief, didn’t really know, but Zodiac-kun was really capricious. So they couldn’t really rely on the thing. It was only useful because, when danger was approaching, it would warn them subtly—sometimes.

Haruhiro didn’t have to give the orders—his comrades were already on alert. He hesitated for a moment. Should he have Yume put out the lantern? No, if she put it out now, they’d barely be able to see anything until their eyes adjusted to the darkness. That would be bad.

He listened carefully. He heard it. A noise. It was a splashing sound. From the west. Splash. Splash. It was getting louder. Something was walking through the water.

It was closing in.

Haruhiro looked to Kuzaku, pointing to the west. Kuzaku nodded, then lowered the visor of his helm, turning to face towards the west.

It happened immediately after that.

The thing started running. Yume turned the lantern in its direction.

They saw it. A black beast. Huge. Shining, yellow eyes—four of them.

Was it a dog? A wolf? No, it was nothing like that. It was big enough to be a tiger or lion. Maybe bigger.

It came charging towards them. Kuzaku tried to stop its charge with his shield, but it was no use. He was sent flying.

“Gwah...!”

“Isn’t this kind of bad?!” Ranta took a swing with his Lightning Sword Dolphin. The beast didn’t dodge. Incredibly, it deflected it with its forehead.

For that instant, at least, it did seem to get zapped, but it more or less shrugged it off.

Ranta leapt backwards. “Damn it’s hard! How hardheaded is that thing?!”

“Ohm, rel, ect, del, brem, darsh.” Shihoru wrapped herself in an Armor Shadow. It would nullify all attacks, or failing that, blunt them at least a little. It was the sort of cool-headed decision they had come to expect from Shihoru.

“Kuzaku?!” Merry screamed, but there was an immediate “Kay!” followed by the sound of someone getting up in a pool of water. It looked like Kuzaku was all right.

The beast moved its head around languidly, looking at each of the members of the party. Its shoulders were one to two meters off the ground. Its torso was maybe three meters long. It was ridiculously huge, and more than a little intimidating, but it wasn’t ten times their size or anything like that. That said, if it chomped down on one of them, it looked like it could bite through an arm, a leg, or even a neck like it was nothing. Kuzaku was lucky to be all right after being tackled by that thing.

Yume was crouched low and breathing heavily. She had her machete drawn and in her left hand, but she didn’t have her bow at the ready. Her bow and arrows weren’t going to do anything useful against an enemy like this. They were already in close quarters combat anyway. Honestly, they were too close to it. If they turned to run, the beast would immediately pounce on them, no doubt. That would be the end of it. It would kill them in an instant.

The beast had yet to let out a cry of any sort. Every time he heard the sound of its tail slapping the water lightly, Haruhiro’s heart jumped. If it let out a roar

or howl, he'd probably die of shock.

Scary...

Besides, what was it anyway? Was this the beast's territory, and it was trying to drive Haruhiro and the others off for invading it? But, in that case, it would have tried to intimidate them first, right? Then were they its prey? Was the beast trying to hunt them? To satisfy its appetite? Was that it...?

He wanted to run away. *But the footing here is bad, it's dark, the creature looks fast, and it'd be pretty hard to run away without taking any casualties. We have to fight it... don't we?*

If it was looking to eat them, they probably only had to hurt it a little. If they made it think, *These guys are tough*, it would back down.

That's the sense I get. I want to think it's true.

"We're doing this!" Haruhiro tensed himself, declaring that as powerfully as he could. "Don't bunch together! Surround it while trying not to end up right in front of it!"

When Haruhiro and the party went to move, so did the beast. It was large-bodied, but incredibly light on its feet.

Ranta. The beast pounced at Ranta.

"Whoa!"

It looked like Ranta hadn't let his guard down. Had he tried to dodge it while beguiling the beast with his bizarre footwork? It was probably his dread knight fighting skill, Missing.

On more solid ground, he might have succeeded. Unfortunately, he didn't quite pull it off. While Ranta got out of the way of the beast, he tripped and plowed into a pool of water.

"Gwah?!"

"Keep trying, Ranta... Kehe... Fwehehe..."

"Ranta-kun!" Kuzaku tried to hit the beast with Punishment. The paladin's Punishment was similar to a warrior's Rage Blow, but they tightened their

defense with their shield while swinging down with their sword. That difference saved Kuzaku. The beast dodged incredibly quickly, then swung out with its front leg.

A beast punch. It was a hook. Kuzaku blocked it with his shield somehow, but he wasn't able to take the impact and was knocked over.

"Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart!" Shihoru slammed a Thunderstorm spell into the beast. Several thin streaks of lightning caught the beast. The beast let out a groan, its entire body shaking, but it didn't fall. It shook its head, turning its body towards Shihoru.

"Chuwang!" Yume let out a weird cry as she charged headlong towards the beast.

Merry was trying to thrust at it with her short staff, too.

The beast roared, spinning in place to successfully knock both Yume and Merry away. The two of them landed in the water.

"Dammit, don't take me lightly! O Darkness, O Lord of Vice!" Ranta was on one knee with the tip of his sword pointed towards the beast. "Blood Venom!"

No good ever came of Ranta using dark magic. Even when something with a bizarre and terrifying aura fired out of Ranta's body and actually enveloped the beast like it was supposed to, Haruhiro still had nothing but a bad feeling about whatever was happening. For starters, the effectiveness of dark magic was already reduced. Why would anyone go out of their way to use it?

However, for a moment, the beast stumbled. It recovered quickly, but something was clearly wrong with it.

Blood Venom. It was a spell that used Skullhell's miasma to weaken the target's body, or that was what Haruhiro remembered it being. Certainly, the beast looked like it was suddenly feeling ill, or something like that.

Thanks to that, he had an opening. He could save praising Ranta for later. Or rather, if he could get away without praising Ranta, he would. Ranta being Ranta, he was guaranteed to act all conceited about it, after all.

If he said he wasn't scared, it would be a lie. But Haruhiro was confident he

would succeed. No matter how fierce it was, their enemy was a four-legged beast.

He leapt at it from behind, clinging onto its back. He stabbed his dagger into its neck. He stabbed with all his might. He stabbed the hell out of it.

Naturally, the beast thrashed around. It twisted around, flailing its front and rear paws about violently as it tried to throw him off. But because of its body structure, neither its front or rear paws could reach its back. Or so Haruhiro thought, but then one of its rear claws sank deep into Haruhiro's right thigh and tore it apart.

"Gwah?!"

It hurt so much that Haruhiro easily let himself be thrown off. Worse yet, he let go of his dagger which was still stabbed into the beast. On top of that, he fell face first into a pool of water, leaving him unable to see anything. He couldn't breathe properly, either.

This is kind of bad, isn't it? Like, maybe I'm gonna die...?

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart!"

If Shihoru hadn't cast her Lightning spell, Haruhiro might have been the first to fall victim to the beast.

"Nngahh!" That one had definitely hurt the beast. That was what that cry sounded like, and its massive body fell over sideways, kicking up a large amount of muddy water. Haruhiro didn't see it for himself, but he could hear it perfectly.

The dagger. It was the dagger, huh.

Haruhiro's dagger had still been jammed into the beast's neck. That was what Shihoru had aimed her Lightning at.

"Ehe... Now... Ehehehe..." Zodiac-kun spurred them on.

"You don't need to tell us!" Ranta screamed.

"Yeah!" Kuzaku shouted.

Sensing this was their time to strike, Ranta and Kuzaku assaulted the beast. As

Haruhiro wiped his face and got up, he thought, *We can do this.*

The beast was running away. It took off.

That was fast.

Well, the world was harsh for everyone. If it'd stuck around any longer, it would have been too late. It had to be able to make instant decisions, or it would never survive. The beast had completely vanished in no time.

"Anyone injured?" Haruhiro asked, raising his hand. "Other than me."

"As for me," Kuzaku said, "my back hurts a bit, and that's about it."

"Yume's doin' great."

"I am, too," said Shihoru. "Thanks to all of you..."

"I'm totally invincible, after all!" Ranta bragged.

"Don't worry... Kehe... It'll be sometime tomorrow... You'll die instantly... Kehehe..."

"Now, listen, Zodiac-kun! It bugs me, so could you not say that like it's a prophecy?!"

"Haru, let me see." Merry rushed over and crouched next to him, laying Haruhiro's left leg over her knee. "This is pretty bad. Don't be too reckless."

"...Um, no, I wasn't planning to be reckless at all. I wasn't even expecting to get hurt. I just was too optimistic, you could say. Seriously, I'm sorry about this."

"Were you trying to make up for before?" Merry asked him in a whisper.

That was... honestly, it might have been part of it. When they'd been ambushed in the river bed, Haruhiro had been the only one to be hurt, and he'd had to have Merry heal him. That had been a blunder. This time, he wanted to do something impressive and show off his good side.

Could he say definitively that he hadn't been trying to do that? Probably he'd had that sort of ulterior motive somewhere in the corner of his mind.

Still, he was the leader. He was a cheap thief, after all. He wasn't the type that dragged his team along by showing off how capable he was, or the type who displayed a whole lot of leadership, but... once in a while, you know? If he

didn't make them think, *Hey, he's better at this than we thought* every once in a while, he'd find it hard to go on.

If Ranta started looking down on him, it'd cause all sorts of trouble, after all. That, and it'd piss him off.

It wasn't limited to Ranta, though; it went for all of them. He would rather have them respect him than look down on him.

Haruhiro looked away, answering, "Maybe a little" in a quiet voice.

"I respect you, Haru, and I'm grateful to you," Merry said in a voice even quieter than Haruhiro's. "Everyone does. Know that much."

"I know that... I think."

"Well, that's fine, then. Let me heal you."

"Right..." Haruhiro closed his eyes.

I don't want to see Merry up close like this, he thought. I don't want her being so kind to me. I like it, yeah. But it's painful, I guess you could say. No, I really am grateful for it, though.

Haruhiro had gotten wounded, he'd had Merry heal him, and he'd lost his favorite dagger. The short sword they'd found while scooping through the mud at the bottom of the pool of water wasn't going to be usable as it was. It wasn't like he couldn't sharpen it himself, but he didn't have a whetstone. If possible, he wanted a proper smith to do the job.

He decided to call the area with the pools of water where a large number of remains lay sleeping Corpse Swamp.

It felt like they could still get more black coins and items in Corpse Swamp, but there were dangerous animals like that four-eyed beast living around here. They'd have to be very careful as they went about their work. If they let their guard down, they'd be gobbled right up. They had to think that way.

Regardless, since they had gotten ahold of one large black coin and three small ones, they decided to return to Well Village. Not only was Corpse Swamp already cold, they were all soaked too, so they felt cold all the way down to their bones. They wanted to warm themselves by a campfire or something.

They wanted to eat and drink, too.

Haruhiro and the party each hid their faces and they crossed the bridge. Once they were inside Well Village, they felt deeply relieved. Even as they felt that relief, the gloomy atmosphere of the village and the bizarreness of its residents whose language they didn't speak threatened to overwhelm them.

There were just too many obstacles. Were they going to be able to secure their basic necessities from here on? Could they live here? Could they have any reasonable standard of living? It wasn't like they wanted to live in this world. They wanted to go home. To Grimgar. Was there a way back? If there wasn't...

What if we can never go home? What then? What should we do?

"Hey..." Ranta pointed at the blacksmith. "Look. There's... someone there, yeah?"

The blacksmith with the massive upper body and the blood-like eyes was banging away with its hammer.

There was someone in front of it.

"Someone, yeah, but..." Kuzaku shook his head. "...Well, yeah, it's someone."

Was it a customer, perhaps? It could be one of the residents of Well Village, but Haruhiro didn't recognize it. If he'd seen them even once before, he'd remember.

It was tall. Easily twice Haruhiro's height. It looked like, well, like a scarecrow. It resembled a scarecrow. If it hadn't moved with swaying steps, occasionally crouching down, inspecting the blacksmith's wares—in other words, if it had stayed perfectly still—he might have thought, *Oh, what's a scarecrow doing over there?*

Naturally, scarecrows didn't move, so it wasn't actually a scarecrow. Besides, it had those long, thin arms. There were hands on the end of its arms, with what looked like ten or more wire-like fingers. It was wearing something like a raincoat over its head. There was something that looked like a mask on its face, too.

"Y'think it's a customer?" Yume asked quietly.

“A customer...” Shihoru repeated, shuddering. “Is it dragging something behind it?”

“A corpse...?” Merry covered her mouth with her hands.

Haruhiro let out a deep breath. *Let’s calm down. All right. Calm down, man. Keep a clear head. It’s okay.*

Well Village was a safe zone—or it was supposed to be, right? He thought so. Even if they met a dangerous-looking creature here, if they just acted like, *Oh, hello there*, or just ignored it, nothing would happen... probably? Or was Haruhiro just assuming that to be true? Could he be completely wrong? For starters, what basis did he have to think that? It felt like there might be none...

The corpse. Like Merry said, it was probably a corpse. Scarecrow-san (a temporary name) was dragging what could only be the corpse of a humanoid creature behind it. Also, looking closer, wasn’t that the cadaver of a beast slung over its right shoulder, too?

Scarecrow-san abruptly picked up a massive sword and turned to face the blacksmith, saying, “U naa?”

No, had it really said “u naa”? It was a throaty voice, difficult to hear properly, so he wasn’t confident, but that was what it sounded like to Haruhiro.

The blacksmith stopped pounding, held up three fingers on its left hand, then held up eight. “Son zaa.”

Yes. The blacksmith didn’t have five fingers on each hand, it had eight.

“Ouun daa,” Scarecrow-san said, shaking its head.

“Bowna dee,” the blacksmith responded.

“Giha,” Scarecrow-san put the massive sword back where it had gotten it from.

“Zeh naa.”

The blacksmith looked dissatisfied, waving its left hand, then returned to swinging its hammer. Scarecrow-san had tried to buy that sword, but they hadn’t been able to come to an agreement on price or something. Scarecrow-san left the blacksmith, now heading to grocery store.

“U naa?” Yume said, tilting her head to the side questioningly. She was currently wearing the ape-like mask. “Does that mean ‘How much’ or somethin’ like that?”

“Hey, don’t say what I was gonna say, not when you have such tiny tits!” Ranta yelled.

“Don’t call them tiny, stupid Ranta!”

“If it does mean that...” Shihoru nodded slightly, “...it could make shopping easier...”

“U naa.” Merry repeated it to herself a few times. “It’s worth trying, I think.”

“That sounds good,” Kuzaku said.

Haruhiro silently agreed. *It was good. Merry’s “U naa.” It was kind of cute. Yeah. But, I mean, so what? Or rather, I want to stop being so weirdly conscious of everything Merry does. I can’t let it continue. It’s not good for me to be thinking like this.*

It looked like Scarecrow-san had bought itself a bowl of bug stew. It brought its mouth to the bowl, gulping it down. It polished it all off in one go, crunching the bugs with gusto.

“Did it start when we lost that person?” Haruhiro said aloud. “Was that when I became afraid to try all sorts of things?”

5. Difficulties Everywhere



“U naa?” = “How much?”

“Faa noo” = “Hello” / “Zee naa” = “Goodbye.”

A=1 Muu=2 Son=3 Jo=4 Do=5 Kua=6 Shi=7 Zaa=8 Zama=9 Zamu=10 Zan=11
Zaji=12

Yume and Ranta had tried saying various things to the blacksmith and the giant crab grocer, and they were relatively certain about all of those things.

The numbers were a bit complicated. Haruhiro and the others were used to base-10 math, probably because, as humans, they had ten fingers. The residents of Well Village, however, had varying numbers of fingers. So those with eight fingers used base-8, and those who had a total of twelve fingers between their two hands used base-12. That was how it seemed to work. If they pointed at their fingers and asked “U naa?” the shopkeeper would hold up a number of fingers to show them the price. However, if they didn’t know how many fingers the shopkeeper had, it could lead to misunderstandings.

There were three sizes of black coin. The ones Haruhiro and the others had thought were bigger were the medium-sized ones, and the small ones were just slightly smaller than them. The grocer had been kind enough to let them see one the big coins. It was noticeably bigger than the medium-sized coins, thick, and had silver-colored lines running through it.

The big coins were called rou, medium-sized coins were called ruma, and the small coins were called wen. It seemed that rou were fairly valuable, so most trading was done in ruma and wen. So, how many wen were there to a ruma? This was also troublesome, as there didn’t seem to be any set value.

Now, as for how that worked, with the blacksmith and grocer, 8 wen was equal to 1 ruma. However, at the clothing and bag shop, 12 wen was equal to 1 ruma, and at the mask shop, 5 wen was equal to 1 ruma. It varied from store to store, or rather person to person.

That being the case, when the blacksmith said, “Son zaa,” which was three followed by eight, held up three fingers, then held up eight fingers, that meant three times eight, which was 24 wen, or 3 ruma.

If the clothing and bag seller said “Jo zaji,” which was four followed by twelve, held up four fingers, then all twelve of its fingers on both hands, that meant four times twelve, which was 48 wen or 4 ruma.

It was a bizarre situation where the difference between 3 ruma at once place and 4 ruma at the other was almost double the amount in wen. But, this was apparently a completely normal state of affairs in Well Village.

The coin they had found on the body and the one they had found in the riverbed were both medium-sized coins. The giant crab grocer was rather loose about prices, and if they paid it 1 ruma, it would let the six of them eat until they were full. As for well water, after the 1 ruma they’d paid the first time, they hadn’t been asked to pay again. It was probably not a per-use fee, but a one-time payment for the right to have access to the well.

Uh huh, yeah, that’s not plausible at all. There are humans who use base-27 on Earth right now. There have been humans who’ve used base 60 in history, and a whole lot of others. It’s far more plausible that they will have decided on a common mathematical base for the sake of communication, and it won’t have been based necessarily on fingers.

They worked up their courage to ask the blacksmith what it would cost to have a short sword sharpened. It indicated a price of 3 wen. Ranta did everything he could to try to haggle that price down, but it was no good. Having no other choice, they ignored Ranta’s vehement protesting and paid 3 wen to get it done.

At this point, the sum total of the party’s fortune was 1 ruma. It was just enough to get everyone fed. They negotiated with the crab grocer, asking for as much of anything but insect stew that they could get, and then ate until they

were full.

The blacksmith finished sharpening the short sword in the meantime. It was excellent work, but night had come and the gate was now closed. With the gate shut, they weren't getting back outside short of breaking it down.

They didn't feel like just finding a random place to lie down and sleep, so they decided to take a walk around Well Village. Incidentally, Scarecrow-san hadn't left the village yet and was lying down near Watchtower A.

In addition to the blacksmith, clothing and bag shop, mask shop, grocery store, and general store that faced onto the central plaza, the village had another nine buildings. They could see the largest of them on the other side of the plaza. It was made of piled stones, and incredibly it had glass windows, even if they were a little cloudy. There was light leaking out through the windows, so it seemed like someone lived there, but they didn't feel like trying to drop in for a visit.

As for the rest, to the left of the plaza, the north, there were four buildings. And to the opposite side of it, the south, there were also four buildings. These were all shacks made of wood or mud, with straw thatched or wooden shingle roofs. If they had the materials, the party could probably imitate them and build a simple shack like one of these.

They passed a number of residents. Some were humanoids and some were non-humanoids, but all of them hid their faces. The party tried greeting them with a "Faa noo," to see what would happen, but they were ignored.

There was a wharf set up on the riverbed inside the moat. However, it was badly aged, and rotting in places. There was no sign of any boats.

Maybe they could bathe safely if they used the riverbed inside Well Village. It was an idea that came to mind, but they weren't sure they'd be allowed to just start digging. Haruhiro and the others were newcomers and outsiders, after all. They didn't want to do anything stupid and offend the residents. If they were going to try it, they agreed it should be after they had a better sense of the situation.

They decided to camp out in an empty lot where there were no buildings so as not to disturb any of the residents. It was cold, but if they wrapped

themselves in their cloaks, they could still manage to get to sleep.

The girls huddled close together to share warmth. Honestly, the guys were jealous, but there was no way they were going to snuggle like that. It was better to tough it out. For as long as they were able to keep thinking that way, they'd somehow manage to do it.

It wasn't long before Ranta started snoring loudly. The girls were whispering among themselves, too. Looking at the way Kuzaku was tossing and turning, he couldn't sleep either. Well, of course he couldn't. Ranta was the weird one here.

Haruhiro came close to striking up a conversation with Kuzaku several times, but every time, he stopped short. Eventually the girls grew quiet, and Kuzaku stopped tossing and turning.

I should sleep, I'm gonna sleep, come on, sleep. Haruhiro tried to will himself to sleep, but the more he did, the less sleepy he felt. He could only think about all sorts of meaningless nonsense, and lie there discouraged by the utter hopelessness of their situation.

This is no good, he thought. I need to make choices. There are things I can think about, and things I can't. Review what we did today. Take note of what I've learned. Then, tomorrow. Just think about what we'll do tomorrow. Until tomorrow comes. It's better to just forget everything beyond then. I mean, even if I think about it, I have no idea what's gonna happen. No, I guess I do know some of it. We're all going to die some day. That's the one certainty. Yep, we sure are gonna die. No matter what. Well, doesn't that make it all kind of meaningless? Sooner or later, I'll die. My comrades will die. I wonder how. Will it hurt? Will it be scary?

Manato. Moguzo. What was it like when you guys died? Did you think, "No, I don't want to die," or something like that, maybe? Will I be able to die at least reasonably satisfied? If I were to die right now, I know I'd have regrets. I don't want to die yet. I don't want to see any more dead faces. It's best not to think about this stuff. It's too horrifying. What did we do yesterday and today? What will we be doing tomorrow? If I focus on just that, eventually the time will go by, and...

“Boweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

“Whuh...?!” Haruhiro jumped to his feet and looked around.

It looked like his comrades had woken up, too.

Yume rubbed her eyes. “That’s gonna give someone a heart attack,” she said.

“Was it a rooster... you think?” Shihoru was holding her chest.

“That surprised me...” Merry whispered.

“Nngh...!” Ranta stretched. “Well, that’s a refreshing sound to wake up to!”

“How?” Kuzaku grumbled.

You can say that again, thought Haruhiro.

Looking around, they saw that up on top of the bar that the well bucket hung from, there was a brown-ish chicken-like creature—but it probably wasn’t a chicken. It was awfully big for that, after all.

“Boweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

The ominous bellowing was apparently coming from that creature. What a terrible way to wake up.

“My whole body aches...” Kuzaku rolled his shoulders and hit himself on his lower back.

“Well, let’s give it our all again today.” Haruhiro tried to encourage them out of a sense of duty, but his voice sounded incredibly weak.

“We’re still going without breakfast, though!” Ranta said, then let out a cackling laugh.

“That’s fine,” Yume said, puffing her cheeks up under her mask. “Just think of it as goin’ on a diet.”

“If you lose any more of the boobflesh of those tiny tits of yours, what’re you gonna do?” Ranta asked.

“Yume’s boobs haven’t changed that much!”

“Well, let me touch ’em then! I’ll check for you!”

“Being a little too direct there, aren’t you?” Kuzaku looked creeped out. “With

your demands, and your desires...”

“I’m starving here!” Ranta yelled at Kuzaku. “I’ll take tiny tits, or whatever I can get! I just wanna squeeze something! With all the danger we’re in, my sex drive is running high! Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I wanna procreate!”

“You’re way too dangerous, man...” Haruhiro was getting worried about Ranta.

“If only he’d die...” Shihoru said. She was probably at least half-serious.

“Because it’s morning...?” Merry’s response was a mystery. She might have been half-asleep still.

“Ranta.” Yume backed away while still sitting. “You’re *super* unpleasant.”

The way she said it was so serious that even a (crappy) piece of trash like Ranta might have felt a little hurt.

Ranta mimed putting something off to the side in mid-air. “Okay, putting that joke out of the way, let’s move on.”

“You think you can play it off like that?” Shihoru wasn’t having it.

“Yeah, I think I can! Do me a favor, and let me!”

“Why should we do you any favors?” Haruhiro sighed. “Anyway, going without breakfast is gonna be tough. We’ll need to earn at least 3 ruma today so that this doesn’t happen again.”

“Okay, Parupiro, give us a detailed explanation of how we’re gonna earn enough to avoid a repeat of this. I’ll hear you out. You’d better be grateful.”

It wasn’t like Haruhiro had some incredible plan. “Search Corpse Swamp for black coins and other things of value. Remain alert for the four-eyed beast and other such creatures.” That was it.

Ranta cried out, “Booooring!” and was vehemently against it, but the rest of the party was in favor. They left Well Village and headed for Corpse Swamp.

It was good to try and stay on guard, but what, practically, could they do if a four-eyed beast showed up? There could be other, still unknown threats, too. Could they deal with them? There was plenty of reason for concern, but this

was the most reliable way they had to earn money at the moment. They had to do it.

That day they found 1 ruma, 5 wen, a rusted sword, and a spear tip. Fortunately, the four-eyed beast never showed up.

When they returned to Well Village, they brought the blacksmith the sword, the spear tip, and their loot from the day before, Yume's short sword and Kuzaku's sword. The blacksmith raised four fingers. That apparently meant it would pay 4 wen for all of them together. Most likely, it was going to use them as scrap metal, so it was probably valuing them at 1 wen apiece, for a total of 4 wen.

They agonized over it for a bit, but the blacksmith wasn't the type to let them negotiate, and carrying around weapons they weren't going to use was just extra weight. They sold them off, and with the 4 wen that got them their cash on hand came to a total of 1 ruma and 9 wen. They could feed everyone at the grocery store for 8 wen or 1 ruma, so they had more than enough for two meals. They could eat before going to sleep, then again when they woke up in the morning!

It felt good going out to work on a full stomach. Hunger always put them on edge.

Let's make more today than we did yesterday, Haruhiro thought. Our target's 3 ruma.

The four-eyed beast was scary, but he didn't sense it anywhere nearby. Yume, Merry, and Haruhiro found 1 medium sized coin, 2 small coins, and two swords in quick succession. Things were going smoothly.

"Hm?" Ranta pulled some long thing up out of the pool of water. "What's this?"

"Myeeeeek!" Yume jumped backwards. "It's slitherin' around!"

"Ohh?! Y-You're right! It's moving, huh?!" Ranta went to throw it away. However, the thing wrapped itself around Ranta's right arm and wouldn't let

go. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! I-I-I-Is it a snake?!”

“Ah...” Kuzaku looked down. “Th-There’s one on my leg, too...”

When they looked over, there was indeed a long thing coiling around Kuzaku’s left leg.

A snake? Was that what it was? Was it dangerous? Poisonous? How would they know?

“D-Don’t move, Kuzaku,” Haruhiro stammered. “No, maybe you should move...?”

“Which is it?”

“Gwahhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Ranta desperately tried to shake the snake-like thing off of him, but he couldn’t manage it. “What the hell, what the hell, what the hell is this thing?! It’s scary, scary, scary!”

“Ah...!” Shihoru froze solid. “Th-Th-There... could be I-I-I-lots of them... right beneath us...”

“Huh...?” Merry lifted up her short staff as if it was heavy. Why would she do that?

There was one of the snake-like things wrapped around it, too.

“C-C-C-C-Calm down.” Haruhiro took a deep breath. “I-I-It’s not like they’re attacking us. It doesn’t look like they’re gonna, either. It’s fine. I’m sure. Just saying. P-Probably.”

“Kehe...” Zodiac-kun had been right next to Ranta only moment ago, but was now far away from them for some reason. “To believe without proof... is folly... Kehehe...”

“Zodiac-kun’s trying to bail on me?! That’s a seriously bad sign!” Ranta tried to pull the snake-like thing off of him using his left hand. However, there was no sign he was going to get it off. “Nnnngh! H-H-Help me! Someone, help me! Save me, you idiots!”

“Noooooooooooo!” Merry was swinging her short staff around wildly. Even with all that, the snake-like thing was still holding on tight.

“Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhh.” Kuzaku was stumbling.

What, what, what? It wasn’t just his left leg? There was a snake-like thing on his right leg, too? No, there were two, three more of them, crawling up Kuzaku’s legs and trying to ensnare him?

“O-Ohm, rel, ect, del, brem, darsh...” Shihoru cast Armor Shadow to wrap a shadow elemental around herself. It might have been the calm and rational thing to do. However, to be honest, Haruhiro wasn’t entirely okay with her doing it.



“H-Haru-kun?!” Yume looked hurriedly to Haruhiro.

No, don't ask me was a thing he couldn't say. Haruhiro was the leader, after all.

Right. I'm the leader. But, leader or not, there are things I can't do, and things I don't know, you know? Still, if I don't do something, it's blatantly obvious that things are going to get bad, yeah?

“L-Let's get out of the water!” Haruhiro called. “That's the first thing! I-It'd be kind of awkward trying to deal with them here!”

Yume and Shihoru took off running. Ranta and Merry followed suit, one waving his arm and the other her staff around as they did. Haruhiro pulled Kuzaku by the arm as he ran.

While they were going, Ranta screamed out. It sounded like he'd been bitten somewhere.

“Y-You okay, Ranta?!” Haruhiro shouted.

“You moron! There's no way I'm okay! Go die! Dammit, it hurts!”

He's screaming, and he's still moving, so he looks pretty okay, thought Haruhiro.

In a spot of good luck, once they got out of Corpse Swamp, the snake-like things naturally backed off. They were only relieved for a moment, though, because Ranta collapsed and started convulsing.

“Gweh... guhguhguhguhguhguhguhguh, oughhhhhhhh, gurbbbbbbb...”

“Ranta?!” Yume pulled Ranta's helmet off. “Yikes?!”

Even at a glance, it was clearly bad. Ranta was foaming at the mouth. Poison. The snake-like things must have been poisonous.

Merry immediately cast Purify to eliminate the poison, but Ranta was still lying there limply.

“Urgh... I can't believe myself. I nearly got killed there. Damn it all...”

“Ehehe... Why didn't you... just get embraced by Skullhell... Ehe... Ehehe...”

“C’mon, Zodiac-kun, if you bully him at a time like this, then bam! You’re gonna get a smackin’!” Yume was being unusually nice to Ranta.

Actually, Haruhiro wasn’t sure when or how it happened, but Yume was letting him rest his head in her lap. That was so incredibly unusual, he doubted his eyes.

“Hold on... Is the poison even gone? I feel like I’m gonna die... Sorry, Yume... Let me rest like this a little longer...” Ranta moaned.

“Huh? Well, sure, Yume doesn’t mind.”

“For another hour...”

“Isn’t that a little long?”

“Fine, just thirty minutes then...”

“Meow...”

“Geh heh... You fell for it... Ranta tricked you... Geh heh heh...”

“Huh? Did he?”

“I-I did not!” Ranta shouted. “What’re you talking about, Zodiac-kun? I-I’m seriously, seriously feeling awful! L-Like, I’ve got nausea, a headache, and a stomachache, okay? I’m not making this stuff up!”

“That’s soundin’ super fake! You’re actin’ pretty energetic, too!” Yume cried.

Of course, Ranta was forcefully evicted from Yume’s lap. That didn’t matter, but still, they were in a bind now. Their reliable, guaranteed method for acquiring black coins in the Corpse Swamp came with not just the threat of the four-eyed beast, but a second threat now: those snake-like things, the poisonous swamp snakes. It could hardly be called a reliable method anymore.

“So? What’re you gonna do now, Parupiro?”

When Ranta asked him that in a grumpy tone, Haruhiro nearly snapped.

What do you mean, “What am I gonna do?” You’re pushing this off on me? At least ask, “What are we gonna do?” We’ve got to start by talking it over first, obviously!

While Haruhiro was thoroughly chewing Ranta out in his head, it helped calm

him down. Even if he snapped at that (scummy) (crappy) (stupid) piece of trash and made it clear he was wrong, the guy was trash, so it wasn't like he was going to have a change of heart. If Haruhiro snapped at him, it would only tire him out. It was a waste of perfectly good anger.

"Maybe we could try going into the forest..." Haruhiro began.

When he proposed the idea, the rest of them accepted it with surprising ease.

Is that okay? he wondered. *Isn't everyone else not thinking enough about all this?* He couldn't help but feel that way, but maybe it was just that they couldn't find the energy to. The truth was, Haruhiro felt the same way sometimes. It was a bad trend. That said, he couldn't just do nothing. If they didn't do something, anything, they couldn't keep living.

For now, they decided to go into the forest somewhere close to Well Village's bridge. It was harder than they expected. The twisted, whitish trees grew so densely that even finding a gap big enough for a single person to pass through was hard. Were they going to have to cut them down as they went?

Kuzaku said something hopeful. "If it's like this, there're probably no large beasts, or anything like that."

Shihoru pointed out something unpleasant. "There could be snakes or something like them, though..."

"Shihoru—" Haruhiro started to say, then shook his head.

"Huh? What is it?"

"N-No, nothing. You're right... There could be snakes, huh... Poisonous ones..."

"H-How about we turn back?" Ranta was scared.

Serves you right, thought Haruhiro. But he wasn't any more keen about dealing with snakes himself. He wouldn't want to get bitten like Ranta had.

"Be careful," Merry cautioned them. "I can only cast Purify as many times as I can cast Heal."

Yume said, "Hey, hey," pointing off to the west. "Waaaaay over there, y'see, it's far off, but there's somethin' shinin' over there, maybe?"

“Shining...” Haruhiro squinted his eyes and looked in that direction. “Hey, you’re right.”

What it was, he couldn’t say for certain, but there was definitely something like a light beyond the trees. Or at least it looked like it.

“Think we can get there?” Kuzaku asked in a whisper. “Make it all that way, before night comes?”

“Hard to tell how far it is, after all...” Ranta was being uncharacteristically timid.

Incidentally, Zodiac-kun hadn’t even come into the woods with them. It seemed like the demon might get caught on branches and stuff, so maybe it had declined for that reason. If he didn’t have Zodiac-kun with him, Ranta was just a piece of trash, worth less than crap.

Shihoru hesitantly suggested, “Should we go back?”

Haruhiro looked to Kuzaku, Yume, and Merry. Not only did none of them say anything, they didn’t do anything that would express an opinion.

“Yeah...” Ranta said, being the only one to agree with Shihoru.

This wasn’t good. This atmosphere was no good at all. He wanted to change it, but how? Haruhiro had no idea.

For now, at least, he wanted time to think... maybe? But even if he did think about it, would he find an answer? He wanted time... No, that wasn’t it, he just wanted to run away from this situation for now, didn’t he? It might not just have been Haruhiro; maybe they all felt that way.

Yeah, this is no good, huh, Haruhiro thought. It’s not gonna work out like this. It’s not. No two ways about it, this is no good... but still.

“How about we go back, for now?” Haruhiro proposed.

He’d gone ahead and said it. Even though, as leader, he needed to straighten them out. It was a time when he needed to chastise his comrades, or encourage them, and he knew that more than well enough, but he couldn’t do it. He was beyond hopeless. His strength had left him.

Are we gonna be able to go on like this, from here on out...?

6. What is Living?



Whether they could go on or not, they had no choice but to try.

In addition to the 1 wen they already had, they had 1 ruma and 2 wen they'd found in Corpse Swamp, plus 2 wen that they'd gotten by selling the two swords to the blacksmith as scrap metal, for a total of 1 ruma and 5 wen. They were a bit short of the 2 ruma they would need for two meals, but if they negotiated with the giant crab who ran the grocery store to give them what it could, it would probably work something out with them. Sure, the grocer looked like a crab, but he (she?) was a good guy. Probably.

Haruhiro didn't know what time it was, so he could only look at the ridge in the distance and judge if the strength of the flames was dying down, or if it was still fine, to determine if night was coming. Other than that, he could only rely on his stomach and his intuition. How did the people of Well Village keep track of time? They might tell him if he asked, but it wasn't a question he could express with only gestures and an extremely limited vocabulary.

Though they had eaten, it felt like there was still time before night. If they were just going to sit on the ground in silence, that was pretty difficult in its own way. Shihoru was keeping awfully quiet, and he wanted to do something about that, but he didn't know how.

"Bingoooo!" Yume suddenly let out a strange shout and jumped up. "Listen, Yume, she had an idea. How about startin' a campfire?"

This was Yume's plan. The forest was keeping them out, and it wouldn't be easy to get inside, but they could at least find dry wood there. They would gather it, and make a campfire right outside Well Village. It'd warm them up. When night got close, they could rush inside the village. It probably wasn't that dangerous next to the village, so they could sleep around the fire.

It was unanimously agreed, *Let's do it.*

They left the village, gathering fallen branches at the edge of the forest. Yume identified the ones that were properly dry, putting the half-dried ones off to the side.

They set things up a little ways from the bridge. They put thick branches on the bottom, then piled the thinner ones on top. If they did that, the thick ones on the bottom would burn like charcoal.

Yume was good at starting fires. That was to be expected from a hunter. Once Yume had a brilliant fire going, she kept an eye on it, throwing more branches on the fire and blowing into it to make it stronger. If they left the half-dried branches near the fire, eventually they would dry out, and they'd be able to use them.

"That's warm..." Ranta sat with his knees up against his chest, sticking his hands out towards the fire. "Seriously, seriously warm... It's damn soothing... Fire's the best... Greatest thing in all of history... Oh, the conveniences of civilization..."

"Um, Ranta." Kuzaku was sitting cross-legged. "Are you crying?"

"I am not. It's not tears, it's snot..."

"Snot comes out of your eyes, huh..." Shihoru was sitting too close to the fire. "Gross..."

"Shove off! When a guy's enjoying himself, don't go dissing him and ruining it, you moron!"

Merry crouched down, putting her palms towards the fire, and closed her eyes. Her lips loosened a little, and she looked comfortable.

"If only we could catch some fish..." Yume was sitting between Shihoru and Merry with her legs in a w-shape, looking into the fire she started. "Then we could cook 'em, and eat 'em."

"Fishing, huh..." Haruhiro was, of course, sitting in front of the fire like everyone else. "You think there's fish in the Lukewarm River? I mean, it's lukewarm..."

“Well, it wouldn’t be weird if there were,” Ranta said, snorting. “Like, there could be man-eating fish. Don’t you think?”

“If we started a fire in the riverbed,” Merry started to say, “it might keep enemies away, and then we could bathe in peace, maybe?”

“No, we’d be able to see then.” Kuzaku looked down for some reason. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Oh.” Merry hung her head. “...That’s right.”

“I wouldn’t mind.” Ranta flared his nostrils. “Even if you can see. I’m generally okay with nudity. Actually, is it anything to worry about? Like, whether you’re seen, or not. It doesn’t matter. If it means you can take a bath, be ready to make some sacrifices. It’s a trade-off. In fact, go ahead and show off. I don’t care if you see me. So, all of you guys let me see you. It’s fair. There’s no problem. That’s that neatly resolved, huh? Okay. Let’s go do it right now.”

“Why don’t you go by yourself?” Shihoru said coldly.

But I do want to take a bath, thought Haruhiro. Like Kuzaku was saying, a campfire would light things up, so that’s no good, but isn’t there some way we could make it safe? Maybe we should seriously consider digging out a hole to use as a tub at the riverside inside Well Village. I mean, it’s not like the residents are guaranteed to get angry. They might be willing to overlook it. They might not even care. Maybe I’ll try asking the crab grocer, the blacksmith, or the well guard. Though I feel like I’d have trouble explaining what bathing is...

Haruhiro didn’t have the will to fight off the sleepiness that snuck up on him. He lay down and went to sleep. What if a wild beast attacked them? He’d deal with that when it came to it. It was a bad, haphazard way of thinking, but he was tired, and it was warm.

Please. Just for today. Just for today, don’—

“...ro-kun... ruhiro-kun... Hey... Haruhiro-kun...”

Someone was shaking him awake.

Shihoru. It was Shihoru.

“Huh...? What’s up?” Haruhiro sat up, looking towards the ridge in the

distance. “Huh? Is the night not over yet?”

“Look.” Shihoru pointed towards the bridge.

“...Um, oh.” To say Haruhiro was shocked would be an understatement. “— Whaa?!”

There. It was right there. Something, in front of the bridge.

A horse? Was that it? Wasn't it awfully hairy, and big for that? That horse-like creature was pulling a cart. Was it a cart? A wagon. It was awfully big. Just what was loaded in it? It was covered, so he couldn't tell.

There was a humanoid-creature crouching next to the wagon. *That creature, it reminds me of someone*, thought Haruhiro. It had a terrifyingly muscular upper body, but extremely short legs.

Oh. The blacksmith. It had the exact same body structure as Well Village's blacksmith. Maybe this guy who owned the wagon and the blacksmith were the same race?

This guy wore a hood low over his eyes, and had something like a pipe in his mouth that was giving off smoke. He was smoking tobacco, apparently.

Everyone but Haruhiro and Shihoru were still asleep. The campfire had gone out. The wagon had lantern-like lights hanging from it, so it was a little bright.

“...How long has he been there?” Haruhiro asked Shihoru in a whisper.

“Um... er...” Shihoru leaned in closer to Haruhiro. She must have been scared. “I woke to the sound of the cart approaching... It looked like it came out of the forest...”

“Out of the forest? A big cart like that was able to get through?”

“Off in the distance...” Shihoru gestured towards the northwest with her chin. “There's a road or something there, it seems. The cart came from there, after all...”

“Hmm... A road, huh. —So? How long ago was that?”

“I couldn't say... I thought I was having a strange dream at first...”

“Ohhh. ...Yeah, that makes sense. I understand. You wouldn't expect

something like that to come out of nowhere.”

“So, the cart stopped there. That person... got out. Then, after a little bit, I woke you.”

“Who do you think they are?”

Eventually, the giant chicken of Well Town cried, *Boweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh*, and the rest of their comrades woke. There was a confused uproar about the wagon, but that made the wagon’s owner look in their direction, and they all shut their mouths and tensed themselves.

“Y-Y-You wanna fight, bud?” Ranta said in an incredibly tiny voice.

Maybe the guy heard him. When the wagon owner stood up, Ranta performed a kowtow.

If it comes down to it, let’s offer Ranta up as a sacrifice, thought Haruhiro. *Yeah, let’s do that.*

Unfortunately, it wasn’t necessary. When the lookout of Watchtower C opened the gate, the wagon’s owner got back into the wagon. The hairy horse shook its head, then began pulling the wagon. The wagon moved forward.

Could it cross that bridge? It made it, just barely. It wasn’t just a matter of width. The bridge seemed just strong enough to support it, and every time the wagon’s wheels turned the planks of the bridge screamed. The bridge wasn’t going to break, was it...?

When the wagon made it across the bridge safely, it made Haruhiro want to burst into applause. Not that he was going to, though.

Haruhiro and the others all hid their faces and followed the wagon into Well Village. The wagon stopped in front of the blacksmith. Like they might have expected, the wagon’s owner and the blacksmith were chatting like close friends.

“Those two dudes, they’ve gotta be brothers, right?” Ranta started to panic all on his own, frantically explaining himself to Haruhiro and the others. “Wh-When I said ‘those dudes,’ it just came out that way! I-I totally didn’t mean to be disrespectful! Let me tell you, I respect them! Seriously!”

“Like I care...” Haruhiro sighed. “But, they do look like brothers, or relatives at least, huh. Do you think the cargo has something to do with the blacksmith?”

“Looks like they’ve started unloading,” Kuzaku said.

It wasn’t just the wagon’s owner; the blacksmith helped, too. They removed the cover on the wagon. The owner got into the back of the wagon, passing the cargo to the blacksmith. The blacksmith carried it beneath the smithy’s overhanging roof, laying it all on the ground.

“Hey, guys.” Ranta raised his thumb and pointed to the blacksmith’s shop with it. “How’s about giving them a hand? It might get us better prices in future, you know?”

“With a blatant ulterior motive...” Yume sounded exasperated, but it wasn’t a bad idea, for something coming from Ranta.

“Okay.” Haruhiro nodded. “Let’s help. Just us three guys, for now. If we’re not careful, they might get mad and beat us to death, so Yume, Shihoru, and Merry, you all stay here.”

Haruhiro’s fears were almost realized. The blacksmith raised up his hammer, trying to intimidate them and chase them off, but when Ranta performed a kowtow and desperately tried to explain, the blacksmith seemed to understand. Though the blacksmith looked at them doubtfully, he let them help with the unloading.

The cargo was charcoal. Haruhiro had heard back in Alterna that a blacksmith’s work required coke or charcoal. From what he had been told, coke had to be processed with coal, but charcoal could be used as is to produce high temperatures. It could also be used for things like purifying water.

It seemed that the wagon’s owner hadn’t just carried it here, but he’d also made the charcoal. There were a number of sturdy-looking axes in the wagon that Haruhiro figured could only have been meant for felling trees, so the wagon’s owner was likely a woodcutter, too. He was a charcoal burner.

When the unloading was complete, the charcoal burner started helping the blacksmith. The charcoal burner really seemed to enjoy it, but the blacksmith complained about every little thing he did. From the way they were acting, was

the blacksmith the older brother, and the charcoal burner the younger brother? Maybe the younger brother had aspired to become a blacksmith like his big brother, but he hadn't had the talent, so he'd become a charcoal burner to help his brother. Well, this was just Haruhiro's imaginings, so it was all just a wild idea.

Perhaps as a way of paying them for their help, the blacksmith demanded to see Haruhiro and the party's weapons, then he and his little brother worked on them together. The party was really grateful for that.

Then the blacksmith pulled out a sword. It was a beautiful greatsword that shone blue, it had complicated designs carved into the blade, and there were fine details on the hilt and pommel, too. The blacksmith had Kuzaku hold it.

The moment he did...

"Oh...!" Kuzaku cried out in surprise.

It was really light. He took a fighting stance, swung once, and then Kuzaku shuddered with excitement.

"This thing's crazy. It's absolutely crazy. It's no joke. Even a guy like me can tell that. This is an incredible sword..."

The blacksmith took the sword back from Kuzaku, showed them a large coin, then raised five fingers, followed by eight fingers. Forty large coins... in other words the blacksmith wanted to tell them this sword would cost 40 rou. Haruhiro couldn't imagine how much that was, but if he put it in Grimgar's standards, would it be like 40 gold? The large coins seemed really valuable, so it might have been more than that. In any event, he knew it was expensive enough to make his eyes pop out of his head. It might have been the blacksmith's most expensive item, or something close to it.

Later, while Haruhiro and the others were eating their meager meal at the grocery store, the charcoal burner's wagon started to move. The wagon went at the same speed as a person walking. Haruhiro and the others tried going along with it. They intended to back off if the charcoal burner looked upset, but it looked like he didn't mind.

When the wagon crossed the bridge, it went north for a while, then turned

west. Shihoru had been right. A road. There was a road through the forest. The trees had been cleared from it, and there were wagon tracks on the ground. The wagon's wheels fit those tracks perfectly.

The wagon was going at a good pace. The road meandered a little, but it was mostly straight.

They heard birds, or some other animal. Along the way, Yume noticed the wagon was emitting a strange noise. There were bell-like objects hanging from the coachman's seat where the charcoal burner was sitting. They were making a low, heavy ringing sound. Was there some meaning to it? Like warding off beasts?

They came out into an open area. There was a little shack like a mountain hut. Next to it was a kiln with a roof and a charcoal shed. There was a stable, too. There was a great amount of firewood piled up. It looked like this was where the charcoal was burned.

The charcoal burner parked his wagon and went into the hut.

Haruhiro and the others took a walk around the site, then tried going into the forest. In this area many of the trees had been cut down and it was sparser, making it fairly easy to walk through.

In addition to the road to Well Village, there was another road leading off in a different direction. The wagon tracks were worn deep in this one, too. Where did this road lead? Were there villages other than Well Village?

When they returned to the coal burning site, the coal burner was sitting in front of his hut smoking. It looked like he was relaxing. He didn't even look at Haruhiro and the others.

The hairy horse had been let loose, and it was eating grass. If that thing kicked them, they'd die instantly. Even being swiped by its tail would probably do some damage. It was probably best not to approach it carelessly.

"It feels like our world just expanded a bit... maybe?" said Shihoru.

"Yeah." Kuzaku nodded in agreement.

"Not that it'll make us any money." Ranta crouched down, pulled out some of

the grass, and twirled it around his fingers. “Oh, yeah, forgot to summon Zodiac-kun. Oh, well...”

“There’s more to life than money, isn’t there?” Yume hung her head. “...Yume is hungry, though.”

“Want to head back?” Merry hesitantly suggested.

Haruhiro was grateful for it. They had come out here on the spur of the moment, but it was hard to say they’d gained much for it. He didn’t want to say they’d gained nothing, but the truth was something close to that. He didn’t want to go home empty-handed. But what else could they do?

“Let’s go back!” Haruhiro tried to make it a strong declaration, but everyone looked at him funny, so he added a “...maybe?” and tried to muddy the waters.

How lame... he thought.

Yeah, he really was lame. He had always been uncool, but he felt like he’d been especially bad lately. Manato would have led them better, and more smartly. Tokimune would have pulled everyone along with his easygoing cheer.

What about Haruhiro? He could only do things his own way. What was his own way, though? Ultimately, what was it? What should he do?

Now that they’d been thrown into a ridiculous situation like this, his flaws were becoming all the more apparent. He was so flawed that, honestly, Haruhiro himself was depressed, and he was at a total loss for what to do.

He wanted someone to rely on. Desperately. He couldn’t cast his duty aside. He knew that, but he honestly wanted to abandon it. To throw it all away, and flee.

Haruhiro and the party were following the road through the forest back to Well Town. What should he be doing now? What should he notice, and what did he have to do about it? Haruhiro needed to think about that. He did, but... his thoughts were dominated by his dissatisfaction, his discontent, his displeasure, as well as his unease, his fear, and his despair.

Maybe he should just be open with them and say it? What if he said, *Right now, this is how things are, you know, and I’m the leader, yeah, but I’m not*

acting like much of one, sorry, and apologize like that? If he did, he might feel better.

Haruhiro was the only one who would feel better. What would his comrades think? Ranta would snap at him for sure.

Like he cared about Ranta.

Would the girls sympathize with him? He could use some sympathy. He wanted them to spoil him a little. He wanted to be freed from this tension, this pressure.

The road was plenty wide, and it was easy to walk along, but they were in near total darkness, so Yume was carrying a lantern. Haruhiro looked back and saw Yume's face, then he saw Shihoru who was walking beside her, and his eyes were drawn to a certain part of her anatomy. He immediately turned back around.

Oh, crap. He had been thinking something really weird there. No, it hadn't been a thought. It was an impulse. Haruhiro was flustered now. He was disgusted with himself.

He had felt a sudden lust, and for some reason it had been for Shihoru. Maybe because Shihoru's breasts caught his eye, and that had caused the sudden rise in his libido? No, the cause and effect relation between the two didn't matter. What mattered was he had felt it. On top of that, his lower half was now in a state he found hard to describe.

Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no, oh, no, oh, no, oh, no...

The thing was, Haruhiro, like anyone, had a sex drive. However, he felt like his wasn't that strong, and he preferred to keep things in moderation. He felt that he did, for the most part. *I'm a young, healthy man, so I can't help it* was something he didn't want to think. He didn't want to think it.

I'm a young, healthy man, so I can't help it...

Now, he had to use the line he had never wanted to use to console himself. *Not that it consoled me at all, okay? What's wrong with you, Haruhiro? You're going crazy, Haruhiro. You're tired, Haruhiro. Don't tell me you're turning into a sex-crazed animal? Here? At a time like this? Stooooooooop...*

While he was doing his best to hold off the urge to clutch his head and scream...

“—Meow?” Yume made a strange sound. “Just maybe, you know, there might be something out there?”

“Something? What do you mean?” Ranta gulped. “What is it?”

“S-S-Stop.” Haruhiro quickly raised his hand, but everyone had already come to a halt. “Yume, where is it?”

“That way, maybe?” Yume pointed behind them to the right. “There’s a sound. A presence, maybe?”

Kuzaku let out a deep breath, drew his sword, and readied his shield. “Should I fall back?”

“Um—er—” Haruhiro shook his head to clear it. “Well... Let’s see. Kuzaku, you go in the direction Yume indicated. Ranta, you’ll be... on Kuzaku’s left. I’ll be on his right. Merry, protect Shihoru. Yume, cover the rear.”

His comrades fell into formation in no time. He was the only one a little slow. Haruhiro couldn’t help but feel that way. His decisions, and his actions, they were slow.

I’m not hard anymore, right? He was exasperated with himself for suddenly thinking that. *Am I stupid? This isn’t the time, is it?*

For a while, he held his breath and stayed still. Nothing happened. He didn’t hear anything, either.

“You sure you didn’t imagine it?” Ranta asked quietly.

“Maaaaybe?” Yume didn’t deny the possibility.

“We’ll stay on guard for now,” Haruhiro looked around the area. *Nothing here*, he thought, and was about to do an about face. “Back to Well Village...”

There was a series of *kohh* sounds, and something that seemed to flash here and there. They were closing in on them.

Creatures? Not that big, though. More than one or two. Five of them, maybe six? More?

Kohh. Kohh. Kohh.

Was that the sound of them barking? Howling?

“Incoming!” Haruhiro yelled, saying what they all already knew.

Immediately, Kuzaku used Bash and sent something flying with his shield.

“Monkeys?!” Ranta swung his Lightning Sword Dolphin around. He didn’t hit.

Monkeys. They really were like monkeys. Their bodies were covered in black or brown fur, and they had tails. They kicked off the ground with their front and rear legs to leap at them, but they didn’t run like four-legged beasts. They grabbed trees with their front legs, and brushed branches out of their way with them. But their faces were less monkeyish and more doglike. They could be called inuzarus, dog-monkeys, maybe.

Haruhiro knocked an inuzaru away with the sap in his right hand, then tried to kick another one, but it dodged. Though he did knock the first one away, it was a weak hit. The inuzaru leapt at him again. He lowered himself and took aim with his short sword, but it dodged it.

“They’re quick little buggers! Leap Out!” Ranta launched himself forward, drawing a sharp figure-8 with his Lightning Sword Dolphin. “Followed by Slice!”

The inuzaru that was sliced up let out a dying *Kohhhh...* and collapsed.

Ranta lifted his Lightning Sword Dolphin aloft. “How’s that?! I’m awesome!”

Yes, yes, yes, yes, we get it, now stop wasting time and keep fighting, okay? was what Haruhiro wanted to say, but before he could, the inuzarus howled *kohh, kohh, kohh*, and began retreating.

“You think you can run away, huh?!” Ranta was about to go after them, but immediately stopped. “Well, we’ll just say they were properly terrified of me. I’m the ultimate dread knight, Ranta, after all! By the way, the ultimate there is about how I’m the ultimate dread, not how I’m ultimately powerful. Though, I’m that, too! Gahahahaha!”

“...I-Is everyone okay?” Haruhiro looked to each of his comrades. “You all are, right?”

“Yep.” Kuzaku lowered his sword.

“Meow.” Yume’s response was as incomprehensible as ever, but he could probably take it to mean she was fine.

“That surprised me...” Shihoru let out a deep sigh.

“There aren’t any more coming?” Merry still had her short staff at the ready.

For now, it didn’t look like anyone was hurt.

Ranta walked up to the inuzaru’s corpse. No, it wasn’t dead yet. It had cuts all over and was trembling. Still, it was clearly about to breathe its last. Without a moment’s hesitation, Ranta stomped on the back of the inuzaru’s neck and crushed it, killing the creature.

Haruhiro thought, *Hey, is that really okay?* But compared to dragging out its final suffering, it might have been kinder to finish it quickly.

Ranta crouched down, looking the inuzaru over before he turned to Haruhiro. “So, this guy, y’think he’d be edible if we cook him?”

Ranta didn’t call himself the ultimate dread for nothing, apparently. It was a self-proclaimed title. Still, the things he thought of were dreadful.

Naturally, the rest of their comrades did not give him a favorable response. Killing living creatures and eating them. It might seem cruel at times, but it was nothing if not natural. Still, even if they killed goblins, they would never consider eating one. The inuzarus were monkey-like, so they felt the same aversion to it, the same sense that it was taboo. However, they were also hungry, and they had no money with which to buy food.

“Think you can butcher it, maybe?” Haruhiro asked, a certain kind of determination hidden in his heart.

“Unngh...” Yume looked incredibly unhappy about the idea. “It’s not impossible, no. Yume, she doesn’t really wanna do it, but she can...”

“Skin it, and take out the organs, huh?” Ranta put an arm around Yume’s shoulder, acting way too chummy. “Should be a cinch, huh. Yume, I know you can do it! Go for it!”

“Hands off, dummy!” Yume brushed Ranta’s arm away. “Yume doesn’t wanna do it after all!”

“I’m not really up for eating it...” Shihoru gagged, then bent over.

“Yeah...” Merry covered her mouth with her hands.

“If you tell me to eat it, I will though...” Kuzaku said hesitantly.

Kuzaku, you’re a good man.

Yeah, that was right. It wasn’t like it was human meat. It was just from a monkey-like animal, that was all. Even if it tasted bad, it was better than starving. If they could eat, they had to eat.

“Yume, I’ll help, too.” Haruhiro looked Yume straight in the eye. “Do you think you can at least try for me? If you really can’t, just tell me how to do it, and I’ll do it.”

In the end, Yume didn’t refuse.

Haruhiro carried the inuzaru’s corpse off, preparing a campfire next to Well Village’s bridge. When the fire was ready, they began the work of butchering it. Once she decided to do something, Yume was reliable. Haruhiro was only able to lift it up, turn it over, and hold it still for her. Yume did all of the important work. Yume offered part of the kill to the White God Elhit, then started cooking the meat she had neatly put onto skewers over the fire.

When the meat was cooked, everyone dug in at once.

When they had chewed and swallowed, Ranta turned his head from side to side.

“Well, tastes pretty normal, huh. Not that bad, not that good. Be better with a little salt, maybe...”

“Murrgh...” Yume frowned. “Maybe it’s not that tasty...”

7. The Future Project



Nasty or not, it was edible, at least.

Yume had learned the hunting skill Pit Trap. There were other trap skills like Foothold Trap and Snare Trap, but Yume didn't know either of those. Besides, Foothold Trap required specialized equipment. Still, her master had shown her Snare Trap once, and she'd figured it might be possible for her to build one herself, so she'd decided to try it. If they set up a number of traps near the road to the charcoal burning site, they might be able to snag an inuzaru.

The poisonous swamp snakes were scary. The four-eyed beast merited caution, too. But, for now, Corpse Swamp was the only place they could count on making an income.

If there were snakes, they would immediately move elsewhere, and if they heard the footsteps of the four-eyed beast, they would immediately flee. With those agreements in place, Haruhiro and the others decided to continue searching for black coins in the Corpse Swamp.

Haruhiro couldn't afford to be dispirited and mope around, even though there were many, countless things that could make him feel that way, and he was never far from falling into self-loathing.

There was no helping that. It was always like this, so he had gotten somewhat used to it. Haruhiro had found some tricks for recovering from it, too. If he gave up and decided this was just the way things were, he could accept it.

It had always been a given that Haruhiro had no aptitude as a leader. He had no desire to be one. But he had to do it, and he had no choice but to do it, and so he was one. That was why, naturally, it was hard for him, and the stress was building up.

Haruhiro was no saint, and was in fact an ordinary, mediocre person, so it was only to be expected that he might go a little crazy and lust after his comrades.

It wasn't like he wasn't trying to improve himself. For his comrades, and for himself, he wanted to become a better leader. If only he could. But it wasn't so simple. Progress wasn't steady. It was one step forward, two steps back, another step forward, another step back. That was fine. If he didn't tell himself that, he couldn't go on.

One day, when they went to Corpse Swamp, there were multiple four-eyed beasts lurking around, and they had no choice but to turn back.

Another day, they changed spots several times, but they kept running into the poisonous swamp snakes. In the end, Kuzaku and Yume were both bitten, giving them a terrible time.

Even when the inuzarus fell into their traps, they would usually break free and escape. Still, maybe Yume was getting better at trap-making, because sometimes they did manage to catch them now. They were figuring out how to cook them, too. If they bled them quickly, seasoned the meat with strong herbs, and flavored it with salt, they could be pretty tasty.

The grocery store sold salt, but a tiny bag cost one whole ruma. It was pricey, so they were stingy with how they used it.

In Well Village, though not quite every day, they would see visitors here and there. They were of many races, but all of them covered their faces, so they seemed to be aware of the rule for entering the village. Perhaps it wasn't only Well Village that did this; perhaps it was a rule that held true all across this world, or all across this region.

Visitors primarily came for trade. Some came to sell, some came to buy, and some to do both. The ingredients at the grocery store were gathered by a number of people from Well Village, or brought in by hunters like Scarecrow-san.

The residents of the stone building still hadn't shown themselves. Haruhiro and his party more or less recognized all the others.

The lookouts on the five watch towers and the guard at the well worked in

shifts, and there were nine of them in total, as far as Haruhiro could tell. They were apparently allowed to eat at the grocery store without paying.

Outside of those nine, the blacksmith and everyone else had to pay to eat. Furthermore, the residents of Well Village only ate once, maybe twice a day at most.

Well, due to budgetary considerations, Haruhiro and the party were doing the same.

They couldn't hold anything resembling a proper conversation with the residents. Thanks to that, they hadn't been able to get permission in advance, and it had taken some courage to go ahead and try it, but they had managed to bathe safely at the riverside in Well Village. When they'd gotten carried away and tried to pitch a campfire there, too, the well guard had come over and put it out without letting them say anything, so apparently doing that was against the rules.

It was cold and unpleasant sleeping without a fire. That made sleeping outside preferable.

Thus, by the time they were spending their nineteenth night in this world, their money on hand had reached more than 4 ruma, and they had developed patterns in their lifestyle.

4 ruma was worth only four meals, two days' worth of food. It was no great amount of money, but even having just a little bit saved up gave them some degree of comfort. For the moment, Haruhiro was holding all of the black coins as the shared property of the entire party, but when they saved up more, he intended to give everyone their own share. Then he could buy a little of this, a little of that. Little dreams would open up to him.

"But, man," Ranta said, rolling over in bed, "we can't go on like this forever. I mean, I'm tired of digging through the mud."

"It doesn't matter if you're tired of it..." Shihoru was huddling by the fire with Yume and Merry.

The three of them had bathed before Well Village's gate had shut for the day, so, somehow... they seemed strangely radiant, and Haruhiro couldn't stand to

look at them directly. Funnily enough, when he looked too long, he got kind of aroused. But curbing his baser desires was Haruhiro's specialty.

Yeah. Maybe not? Maybe not...

How were Ranta and Kuzaku handling it? Was Kuzaku occasionally sneaking off and doing you-know-what with Merry? Though, if that was going on, even Haruhiro would have to notice. Yeah, it didn't seem like they were. Were they holding themselves back? They didn't have to. There was already little enough to enjoy here. A little fun would do them good. It was necessary, in fact.

But clapping Kuzaku on the shoulder with a smile, telling him they could go at it all they want, and that it was A-okay... that seemed wrong, somehow. Or rather, Haruhiro could never do it...

Lying on his back, Kuzaku sniffled a little. He apparently had a cold. "...Feels like our efficiency is dropping. Well, that's just the sense I get. We haven't cleaned the place out yet—but it's looking like we'll need to go into the poisonous snake-infested areas or the ones where the four-eyed beasts always show up eventually..."

"How's about goin' a little further out next time?" Yume had her cheek up against Shihoru's chest, and she was hugging Merry at the same time.

Damn, Haruhiro was jealous... No, no, no, no, no.

"There was a road past the charcoal burner's place." Merry seemed a little tired. She looked drowsy.

"I've been curious about that, too, actually." Haruhiro stared into the fire. *O flames, bring me to my senses. Please*, he prayed. "Like, is there another village out that way, or something? Or maybe a bigger town? Though, even if there is, I'm not sure it matters to us."

"Anyway, that's our number one candidate," Ranta declared with a click of his tongue. "Other than that, we could cross the Corpse Swamp and head south. Heading downstream along the Lukewarm River's an option, too. There was something in the riverbed, but if we put our minds to it, we can deal with whatever it is."

Haruhiro kept staring into the fire, never looking away. "But it's not like we

have anything to go on.”

“Are you stupid, Parupiro?” Ranta said scornfully. “It’s a brand new world, damn it. There’s no way we’d have anything to go on.”

“Well, yeah, but you don’t think things through enough.”

“Call me bold and fearless,” Ranta declared. “Well, you know how it is. Figuring all of that out is the task at hand. But we’ve got another task to accomplish, don’t we? An important one.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Shihoru plugged her ears. “It can’t be anything good.”

Haruhiro looked over towards Shihoru despite himself, then instantly regretted it. Yume had her face practically buried in Shihoru’s chest, while Merry was leaned against Yume, her eyes half closed. He wanted to punish himself for carelessly thinking, *Hey, share some of that warmth with me.*

“I’m saying, we could end up living here forever.” Ranta took on a serious tone, completely out of character for him. “We’ve gotta be ready for that... you know?”

“Hey, now...” Haruhiro struggled to find a response. “What are you saying? This is so sudden.”

“It’s a fact, and you know it,” Ranta replied. “I’m not wrong, am I?”

“Hope is—”

“—not lost yet, is that it? Oh, come on, Parupirorin. Don’t you start talking like some hotblooded hero. You’ve never been that positive and optimistic. Face facts. We may never make it back home. If so, we’ve gotta live here until we drop dead.”

Merry took a deep breath, held it, and then gently exhaled. She was gazing absently into the fire.

Shihoru started to open her mouth, but she said nothing.

Yume let out a weird groan.

“You say we may never make it back home.” Kuzaku sat up. “But where is

home? Grimgar?”

“Huh?” Ranta cocked an eyebrow and glared at Kuzaku. “What’s that supposed to mean, Kuzacky?”

“Nah, was just thinking about it. It seems like we weren’t always in Grimgar, after all.”

“Sure, but we don’t remember anything from before,” Ranta said.

“Well, yeah...”

“Don’t talk about stupid stuff,” Ranta shot back. “Besides, the issue I’m bringing up now has nothing to do with that. Get a clue. You damn moron...”

“You didn’t have to go that far, though.”

“Huh?! You looking for a fight, pal?! I’ll take you on!”

“Quit it.” Merry stopped them.

Normally that would have been Haruhiro’s job, but his mind was elsewhere.

“We’re looking for a way back to our original world,” Shima had whispered to him.

Back, Haruhiro thought. *Back to our original world.* What did that mean, anyway?

Haruhiro touched the receiver hanging from his neck through his clothes. With all that had happened, it wouldn’t be strange for Soma to contact them. Secretly, he was hoping he would. But the receiver had shown no signs of vibrating. Did it not work across worlds, maybe?

Haruhiro shook his head. No use dwelling on it. He and the others were here. Here, and nowhere else. They were in another world, not Grimgar, nor the Dusk Realm.

They might be spending their whole lives here. The possibility had, of course, crossed his mind before.

“Ranta,” Haruhiro said, “I knew without you having to tell me. It’s... entirely possible that could happen. I know that much. But so what? Even if we prepare ourselves to accept that, nothing will change, you know. What we’ll have to do

won't change. It's all the same."

"Moron. Are you stupid? There's no way it's the same." Ranta got up, punching his right fist into his left palm. "We've gotta propagate, damn it! In other words, baby-making! Ba-by-ma-king!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa..." Shihoru held Yume tight.

"You—" Haruhiro was at a loss for words.

Merry shook her head as if to say, *Unbelievable*.

Yume looked simply dumbfounded.

"The thing about Ranta-kun is," Kuzaku muttered, "no matter what happens, he's always Ranta-kun."

"So, with that decided!" Ranta hopped up, looking around at all of them. "Let's decide on couples! We conveniently have three guys and three girls! With three pairs, if you each pump out about ten brats, we'll have a population of thirty-six people in no time! How's that?! As for me—Well, this is just, you know, part of the project to leave behind descendants, so I won't be picky, but, yeah, if I had to choose, I want... Hm..."

"I refuse." Shihoru raised her hand.

Without missing a beat, Merry did likewise. "Absolutely."

Yume stuck out her tongue. "Yume says no waaaay!"

"Heeey, come on, come on." Ranta stuck his left hand on his hip, wagging his right index finger and tut-tutting them. "There's no refusing or saying no here. This is a project with our future in mind. Don't be selfish. Guys and girls can't make babies without one another, so you're gonna cooperate whether you want to or not. It's your duty, damn it."

"Don't just try to push this project forward on your own, man..." Haruhiro muttered.

"Shut up, Parupyuronosuke. I'm doing this because you're hopeless. Oh, I get it, I get it! It's not like I think anyone here loves me, okay? There's no helping that. I'll put up with the leftovers. Okay, first up, Kuzacky."

“...Huh? Me? What?”

“You have any preferences? Which of the three do you want?”

“Whaa—” Kuzaku put his big hand on the back of his head, looking down.

“Uh...”

There was no need for him to answer. But, honestly, Haruhiro was kind of interested in what he'd say. He knew how Kuzaku felt, but how would he express it in front of the others? Maybe he wouldn't. Would he try to joke his way out of it?

“What’s wrong? Hurry the hell up!” Ranta shouted, spittle flying everywhere.
“Fast! Make it fast! Hurry up! Hurry up! HUUUURYYYYYY up!”

“Hmm...” Kuzaku crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

Wasn't he taking too long? Haruhiro glanced at Merry to gauge her response.

Huh? That's not what I expected, thought Haruhiro.

He had thought she would be acting awkwardly, or anxiously waiting for Kuzaku. But she wasn't. Instead she was holding her knees tight with both hands, with an expression like she might apologize at any second. What was with that? Was it a, *Sorry to put you on the spot, Kuzaku*, or something like that?

Well, maybe it was, but it felt off somehow. It wasn't like Merry. "Like Merry"? Did Haruhiro know Merry well enough to say what was and wasn't like her? It wasn't like he didn't know her at all...

“You’re so indecisive!” Ranta stomped his feet. “Make it snappy! For tits, go Shihoru! For the face, go Merry! If you’re into freaky shit, go Yume! That’s all it boils down to, right?!”

“...Can we bury this guy?” Shihoru asked in a tone so dark it would make you shudder. “All of us together.”

"I vote yes." Merry stood up, wiping all expression from her face.

“Gotta get ’im ready for an easy buryin’ first.” Yume smiled broadly, drawing her machete.

“Wait, what?!” Ranta fell on his rump and backed away. “Stop talking about burying me, and discussing how to do it, okay?! Okay?! Let’s stop this! Please?! I get it, I’ll stop! Okay?! I’ll be more careful in future! I mean, it was all a joke, okay?! You don’t have to take it so seriously, do you?! I wasn’t serious, so forgive me, I’m begging you! Seriously, seriously...!”

With Ranta’s kowtow, the conversation instantly died, and everyone went to sleep on their own. Haruhiro had a hard time getting to sleep. There was a lot floating around in his head.

What about Kuzaku and Merry? he wondered. *Are things going well between them? I mean, in this situation, they really don’t have time for it, huh? But if it has to happen anyway, I want them to be happy together...*

He tried to pretend to be a good guy, but it just made his chest hurt.

Besides, what’s happiness anyway? I don’t even know...

They slept, and woke to the cry of the giant chicken that heralded the coming of morning. A new day had begun.

For now, they crossed the bridge into Well Town and drank from the well. Once they had washed their faces at the riverbed, it was time for an enjoyable breakfast.

That was the plan, but there was someone at the grocer’s already. Of course, it wasn’t strange that there would be a customer, but this one caught their attention.

“...That guy.” Ranta pointed at the customer. “Isn’t he a little too human?”

The customer who had just accepted a bowl of bug soup from the giant crab grocer had two arms, two legs, only one head, and no tail. He stood maybe 180 centimeters tall. Taller than Haruhiro, shorter than Kuzaku. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, or rather, a braided hat made of dry grass woven into a shallow cone, as well as a scarf covering the lower half of his face, and an overcoat that went down to his knees. In addition to the ax-like weapon at his hip, he had a large backpack filled with swords, a crossbow, and more tied to it. He was like a walking arsenal.

The customer shifted his scarf aside and brought the bowl to his mouth,

turning his face up a little as he sipped at the bug soup. When the broth was all gone, he picked up the solid ingredients—which was to say, the bugs—with his fingers, tossing them into his mouth and chewing them with gusto before swallowing.

There's no way he's human, Haruhiro thought for a second, but it wasn't that strange that a human might like the taste of bugs.

The customer said “Ruo keh,” and returned his bowl to the giant crab grocer before turning towards the group.

“Oh?!” Ranta jumped backwards, taking a posture that let him perform a kowtow immediately if need be. That piece of trash (and slime) should have stopped calling himself a dread knight and started calling himself a kowtow knight.

Still, it was true that the customer's stance was intimidating. Even with all the heavy gear he was carrying, he stood there as if it wasn't heavy at all. The way he was standing, his center of gravity was stable. He could move quickly in any direction he pleased. There was no needless tension anywhere in his body. He had no openings, you could say.

It felt like, *This guy is good*, maybe...?

Kuzaku brought his hand to the hilt of his sword, then slowly let go of it, exhaling as he did.

“Is...” Shihoru said.

Is what? Haruhiro wanted to ask, but he couldn't.

The atmosphere was awfully heavy.

Yume groaned, and Merry tried to say something. That was when it happened.

“You people.” The customer spoke. “Could it be, you're human?”

8. Their Senior at Life



“My name is Unjo,” the man said in the same language that Haruhiro and the others used.

To their surprise, this man, Mr. Unjo, had explained that “night has come thousands of times” since he’d strayed into this world.

Were the days here the same length as those in the other world, or were they different? That was uncertain, but if they worked on the hypothesis that they were the same, even two thousand days would be five and a half years, and if it was three thousand, then Mr. Unjo had been in this world for over eight years. He had survived all that time.

“It is hard to believe,” Unjo said in a hoarse voice which seemed to have a wry, laughing tone to it. “That I’m seeing... humans. It’s been so long. So very, very long since last these eyes saw a living human. Never did I think they would. Yet, now, they do.”

Haruhiro understood the words Unjo spoke. However, his accent was weird, and his word ordering could be bizarre. Perhaps he hadn’t spoken the human language in a long time.

Once he discovered that Mr. Unjo was a human, like them, Ranta pelted him with endless questions. “Senior, Senior, Senior, please, teach us! Were you from Alterna, too, Senior?! Were you a volunteer soldier?! Like, how’d you get to this world?! Honestly, what’s up with this world?!”

“Alterna...” Mr. Unjo whispered to himself, then fell silent for a long time.

While Ranta was going, “Yeah, yeah, Alnerta, that’s right, Analta! No, Atarna! No, Alterna! Man, I wanna get back to Alterna! For me, Alterna’s the home where my heart is, but how about you, Senior?! Like, if you could go back,

would you?! Is there a way back?! If there was, you would have used it by now, yeah?! No, but, you know, if you have a hint or anything, could you maybe tell us, okay?! How about it?!”

Ranta just kept rambling on.

Seriously, cut that out, you moron, thought Haruhiro, and he tried to stop him, but, as per usual, Ranta snapped at him when he did.

“Huhh?! I’m not talking to you, pal! I’m asking our senior here! Shut your mouth and go to sleep, dumbass! You’ve got sleepy eyes, so go sleep forever, you idiot! Also, I hope you go bald and explode, too!”

“Um.” Haruhiro ignored the piece of crap and bowed his head apologetically to Mr. Unjo. “I’m sorry. Our worthless piece of trash must be bothering you.”

“You’re trash! Haruhiroooo! I hope you go spinning into hell!” Ranta screamed.

“He’s talkative.” Mr. Unjo suddenly reached out and grabbed Ranta by the head.

“Nwah?!” Ranta froze stiff.

Worthless Ranta was wearing his helmet to hide his face, but Mr. Unjo had grabbed hold of his head, helmet and all. He wasn’t as tall as Kuzaku, but his hands were much bigger.

“Alterna...” Mr. Unjo whispered the word once more, pushing down with so much force that it was like he was trying to crush Ranta. “I had forgotten Alterna. Yes. Because I can never return.”

“Ow, ow, owwww... P-P-Please, forgive me, Senior...”

“Le—!” Yume took one step forward, gulping. “Let him go! Ranta didn’t mean to offend—Okay, maybe he did, but still, he’s Yume and everyone’s comrade...”

“Comrade...” Mr. Unjo cleared his throat painfully, then released Ranta. “Comrades, huh. Those, I have none of. Not a one.”

“Whaaaa!” Ranta spun around and put some distance between himself and Mr. Unjo. “I-I-I-I-I’m, I-I’m saved... right?! I—I’m not dead, right?!”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Merry said without emotion.

“Did you come all this way,” Shihoru asked in a shaky voice, clutching her staff tight, “b-by yourself...?”

Mr. Unjo didn’t answer, pulling up his scarf to cover the lower half of his face. “I cannot return. Nor can you. This is a grave. Mine. And yours.”

“Seriously?” Kuzaku exhaled slightly,

Haruhiro felt like hanging his head, but he forced himself to keep looking up. If he looked down now, he would never recover. He was overcome by that feeling. He had to say something. Less to Mr. Unjo, and more to the group as a whole.

“But, Unjo-san, you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Mr. Unjo turned to Haruhiro, lifting his braided hat a little. He saw Mr. Unjo’s eyes.

He’s human, Haruhiro thought once again. This was a bona fide human. He was probably much older, literally their senior, but he was human, just like them. He had lived alone in this world, surviving all by himself. How hard must that have been?

It must have been hard. It must have been lonely. But, still, Mr. Unjo was alive.

Mr. Unjo might not feel this way, but he was living proof of something.

This place was not a grave.

It might become one someday, but everyone had to die someday. The moment a person died, that place became the site of their death. But that moment had not come yet. It was up to Haruhiro and the others, but if they did things right, they could survive here.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Haruhiro said. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to see you again, and learn all sorts of things from you.”

“Teaching. From me.” Mr. Unjo’s shoulders shook up and down just once. “To all of you.”

“We don’t know anything, after all,” Haruhiro told him.

“Downstream.” Mr. Unjo pointed in the direction the Lukewarm River flowed.
“They are there. The dead ones. It’s a town. A ruin. They are not dead. Yet, they are dead ones.”

“...What’s there?” Haruhiro asked.



“The city of the dead ones. Ruins. You are volunteer soldiers.” Mr. Unjo turned his back on Haruhiro and the others. “It is a good fit. For you people...”

Haruhiro wanted to chase after the departing Mr. Unjo and ask him two or three more things. However, he couldn't. Mr. Unjo's back was clearly rejecting Haruhiro and the others.

Leave me be. That was what it looked like it was saying, and Haruhiro felt that that was what they should do.

This meeting had probably had as much of an impact on Mr. Unjo as it had on them. No, considering how long he had lived alone, he must have been even more shocked. If so, he might have been incredibly confused.

Mr. Unjo entered the building made of piled stones. There was light leaking from the window, as always, so the residents had to be inside. Mr. Unjo might be acquainted with them.

“The town! Of the dead ones!” Ranta was suddenly upbeat, letting out a corny, malicious laugh. “No one expected this! No! It's just as I anticipated! Our path has been revealed! Yahooooo! I'm so awesome!”

“How's that make sense?!” Yume elbowed Ranta. “It had nothin' to do with you, Ranta! It was all Kampyo-san!”

“You mean Unjo-san,” Haruhiro corrected her, sighing. “The city of the dead ones, huh...”

“...It sounds scary.” Shihoru ducked her head, hugging herself, her staff included.

“The dead ones, huh...” Kuzaku was looking at the stone building.

“‘They're not dead,’ he said.” Merry tilted her head to the side in confusion. “What did he mean? Since he calls them dead ones, I would expect corpses that still move for some reason, or ghosts of some sort.”

When Ranta had been in favor of doing it, it had made Haruhiro want to refuse outright, but... Mr. Unjo had called them volunteer soldiers. Mr. Unjo's past remained a mystery, but perhaps he really had been a volunteer soldier at some point. Mr. Unjo might have been looking after Haruhiro and the others as

his juniors. He'd said it was a good fit for them.

It was a place that was a good fit for volunteer soldiers.

The city of the dead ones.

It did make Haruhiro think, *I dunno about this*. But, for some reason, his heart was dancing. Not because he thought it'd be fun. He wasn't Ranta. Just, he was a little excited. He couldn't deny that.

Even having come to this nonsensical world, with no way to get home, and not knowing what will become of us the next day, we're still volunteer soldiers? thought Haruhiro. *Has it become second nature to us now? No, I don't like it. Give me a break.* Still, even as Haruhiro thought that, he made the decision immediately.

"Let's go check it out."

Haruhiro wasn't alone. Ranta wanted to go, too, of course, but so did Yume, Shihoru, Merry, and Kuzaku. It seemed, in the end, the volunteer soldier's way of life had seeped into their very bones.

Some of them were proactive, others passive. They each had their own different attitudes and tendencies, but they had all come to roughly the same conclusion. In fact, not one of them raised an objection.

Digging through the mud had never been the best job for them as volunteer soldiers. The city of the dead ones. Why not go check it out?

Haruhiro and the others got breakfast, then left Well Village. The place was downstream along the Lukewarm River, but they decided to follow the river without going down into the riverbed. There was a vicious beast living down there that would probably sneak up on them without a sound and attack them. They didn't know what else might be there, or where it might come at them from.

At first, the light burning on the distant ridge had been too faint, offering little reassurance. When the fire that was not the sun rose, it stopped being completely dark, but didn't become so bright that it felt like day. The darkness only abated slightly, but at some point, they had grown used to that. Their sense for the depth of darkness seemed to be growing keener. It wasn't bright,

but it didn't feel dark to them, either. The midday darkness was a little easier on Haruhiro than it had been before.

He felt like his hearing had gotten better, too. He had a clear sense for shifts in the air and smells. Even without looking, he could determine his comrades' positions, their footsteps, and get a vague sense of how exhausted they were.

Eventually a mist drifted in from the Lukewarm River, covering the entire area.

"Kehe... Kehehe... Kehehehehehehe... Kehe..." Zodiac-kun, who hadn't said a thing since Ranta had summoned the demon back at Well Village, suddenly burst out laughing.

"Wh-What was that about, out of nowhere? Zodiac-kun?" Ranta was clearly spooked.

"Ehe... Nothing... Ehehe... Really... Nothing... Ehehehe..."

"Now you've got me really worried!"

"Kehe... Don't worry... Ranta... It's nothing... Kehehe... You have nothing to worry about..."

"No, that's why, you see? I worry about it because you say things in a way that makes me worry. It's kind of scary, so could you stop it? Okay? Hey, Zodiac-kun? Huh? Why're you so quiet? Answer me. Well? Zodiac-kun...?"

"You shut up for a bit, too, Ranta." Haruhiro was trying to sense any presences in the mist-filled darkness ahead of them. "Zodiac-kun is trying to tell us something. Take a hint."

"Yeah, and I was trying to get that out of him, wasn't I?" Ranta demanded.

"Kehehe... As if I'd tell you... Kehehehe..."

"Listen, Zodiac-kun!" Ranta yelled. "Have you forgotten which of us is in charge here?! I, the dread knight, am the master, and you are my demon servant, okay?!"

"Nuh-uh..." said Shihoru.

"That's backwards," added Merry.

Yume earnestly piped in, “Maybe if you were one-five-hundredth as cute as Zodiac-kun.”

“A cute Ranta-kun, huh...” Kuzaku mused to himself, then let out a little sigh.

“Heyyyyyyyyyyy!” Ranta howled. “Don’t just say whatever you want about me, guys! If you don’t cut it out, I’m seriously gonna give you a thrashing! I’m seriously serious! I’m gonna show you how scary it is when I get seriously serious, and then—”

When Haruhiro stopped and raised one hand, Ranta immediately closed his mouth.

Everyone stopped and held their breaths.

Now what to do? Haruhiro wasn’t sure about that. Because of the mist, he didn’t know what it was, but there was something up ahead. He felt like it might be a building.

Should they all go and check it out together? Or should Haruhiro go alone? As a thief, it was easier acting alone in a lot of ways. It was easier, yes, but also scary.

“...I’ll be right back,” Haruhiro said, his fear making him speak in a politer tone than usual.

“Be careful,” Merry told him. “Don’t do anything reckless.”

Thank you, he thought. Somehow, that gives me the strength to try. Also, sorry, Kuzaku.

Well, it’s nothing to apologize for, I’m sure. Merry’s just concerned for me as a comrade. That’s a given. Even if that’s what it’s gotta be, it gives me encouragement. Where’s the harm in that? Right...?

Haruhiro moved away from his comrades, using Sneaking to advance towards the apparent building.

Is anything but me moving? No—I think. Not right now, at least.

The direction of the mist, the air, and the wind had changed. There was some obstacle blocking the wind and causing it to change direction.

Haruhiro approached. It came into view. The building.

It was a building made of piled stones. But it was collapsing. It might have been shaped like a box at one time, but only two-thirds or so of it were left now.

He didn't see a roof. Had it caved in? It was a ruined building.

This wasn't the only ruined building here. There was another. No, even more than that. Here, there, and everywhere. There were lots of them.

Mr. Unjo had mentioned ruins. This was the place, huh. The city of the dead ones. This was their destination, huh. Which meant...

...they were here, he had to assume. At the place with the beings that remained unknown to them, the dead ones who were not dead.

Haruhiro pressed his palm to the first ruined building's outer wall. He tried pushing. It didn't budge. Having tested it, he put his back to the wall. He took a breath.

First, I'll try doing one circuit of this ruined building. If it looks like I can go in... do I try it? Is that okay? Either way, I'll do a circuit around it.

He looked around, listened closely, and when he had made a half-circuit around the building, scanning for the dead ones, he hit an opening.

An entrance? Was there a door here? Not anymore.

He poked his head in just halfway. It was too dark to see, but there was some sort of wreckage scattered around. There was no place to step. It looked dangerous to enter.

Now, as for the dead ones, they're not here—I think. They aren't, right?

Next. On to the next ruined building. Haruhiro decided to search the next closest building. It was a little bigger than the last one. It had half of its roof left, too. There was no door in the opening that looked like a door.

He had a bad feeling. No, not just a feeling. There were sounds. He could hear them.

What were those sounds?

Squelch. Smack. Chomp. Smack. Hahh. Nnngh. Slurp. Crunch. Crunch. Gulp. Smack. Huff.

He had some ideas what those sounds might be. He wouldn't be happy to be proven right, but he still had to check.

Why, hello there, Mr. Dead One, he silently greeted a thing in his mind, trying to sound as cheerful as possible as he looked around the building through the opening.

There it was. He'd found one. Not far away. It was a humanoid creature with a tail, crouched over and eating something.

Was that one of the dead ones? It looked surprisingly normal. Now, what exactly was Mr. Tailed Dead One doing?

Haruhiro was interested. But maybe it was best to pull back for now? Haruhiro tried to put his natural caution to good use, but for some reason Mr. Tailed Dead One turned towards him, groaning...

Had he been spotted?

At a time like this, screaming and running would be a bad plan. First, he should see how it reacted. Haruhiro made sure he was prepared mentally and physically so that he could react quickly if it attacked him. Hey, it wasn't a given that it was his enemy, you know? It might even be friendly, after all? Yeah, not likely, huh?

The tailed dead one picked up a weapon-like object of some sort and stood up. Weapon-like? No, it was a weapon. With a thick, curved blade in hand, the tailed dead started walking.

It was coming. This way. With slow steps. The tailed dead one wore something like chain mail, with a shoulder guard only on its right shoulder, along with gauntlets and greaves. It wore a helmet, but its face wasn't hidden.

The eyes... what were those eyes? White. They didn't seem to shine, but its two eyes were very white. Its big mouth was wet with some viscous, slimy liquid.

Haruhiro glanced over at the thing that was lying where the tailed dead one

had been crouching before. He was unsurprised. It didn't shake him that badly. He'd been right. That was all.

That thing seemed to be another creature. It was probably humanoid in shape, but he'd lay eight to nine out of ten odds that it was no longer alive. Haruhiro didn't look for long, and he wouldn't have been able to see well in the darkness, but he didn't particularly want to see it, so maybe that was okay with him.

Oh, my, Mr. Tailed Dead One, were you eating? Did I disturb you? thought Haruhiro. If it would let him off with an apology, he wouldn't have been unwilling to take it up on that, but the tailed dead was already picking up speed. This was no time for apologies.

Haruhiro hurriedly pulled his head back out, running to hide in the shadow of the neighboring building. Even if he was fleeing, he had to do it quietly, ever so quietly.

"Shaah!" The tailed dead one shrieked.

"Where'd he go?!" Was that what it meant?

Haruhiro could hear the tailed dead one's footsteps. He moved in time with those steps.

Maybe I ought to drag it back? Lure it to the others? Worth a shot?

This was the city of the dead ones. If that thing was one of the dead ones, it wasn't necessarily alone. There could be others. But that was the only thing whose presence he felt. For now, he didn't sense any more.

Haruhiro had been found already, and, as a volunteer soldier, Haruhiro and his group hadn't come here for sightseeing and a good time. They had a goal here, yes: to hunt. They had come to hunt the dead ones, as volunteer soldiers ought to.

The tailed dead one.

It might make for a good test of their skills.

Haruhiro came to a stop. The tailed dead one was closing in. It appeared from around the corner.

When those white eyes caught sight of Haruhiro, it opened its mouth wide.
“Kaah!”

It was racing towards him.

Good, Haruhiro thought. *Come*.

He ran. As for finding the place where everyone was waiting—It was fine. He remembered the direction and the rough distance. He wouldn’t screw this up. He turned in that direction, and ran. The enemy was pretty fast, but if Haruhiro ran at his top speed, it would never catch him.

“Haru-kun?!” He heard Yume’s voice.

“There’s an enemy!” Haruhiro shouted. “I’m bringing it with me!” Then he added, “Just one!”

“Leave it to us!” Kuzaku responded.

There. He could see him. Kuzaku was coming out with his shield at the ready.

“I’m counting on you!” Haruhiro ran towards Kuzaku.

Immediately after they passed one another, Kuzaku used Block against the tailed dead one’s curved sword, then struck out with a Thrust. The tailed dead pushed on, unconcerned. Kuzaku didn’t back down, either. They collided.

“Leap Out!” Ranta quickly jumped beside where the tailed dead one was and swung his longsword in a figure-eight motion. “Followed by Slice!”

Lightning Sword Dolphin’s effect had run out and they’d sold it to the blacksmith, so Ranta was using his old standard, Betrayer Mk. II. The tailed dead one dodged like it was throwing itself to the ground, but Ranta’s sword still hit it somewhere.

He couldn’t cut through. It was wearing chain mail.

When the tailed dead one tumbled and then got up, Kuzaku closed in on it. “There!” He slammed his longsword into it. Kuzaku had picked up this longsword in Corpse Swamp and had it repaired by the blacksmith.

The tailed dead one took a hard hit to the helmet and groaned, “Nguoh!” but it didn’t falter. Without missing a beat, it lifted its curved sword up high and

went on the counterattack.

Now, Kuzaku was the one forced back. “Aww, damn it! I’m so weak!”

“Don’t panic!” Haruhiro shouted to Kuzaku, looking at the tailed dead one’s back.

Yume and Merry were on standby, defending Shihoru. It was only one enemy, so that formation made sense. There could be reinforcements, after all.

If that happened, Haruhiro wanted Yume and Shihoru to respond immediately. Merry had protecting Shihoru as her top priority, after all. Everyone knew what they should be doing.

“Ehe...” Zodiac-kun was just floating around. “Ranta... You’re not as good as you brag to be... Ehehe... Finish it already... Ehehehehe...”

“I don’t need you to tell me that!” Ranta launched a violent onslaught on the tailed dead one. It was Hatred, followed by a two-strike combo. Then diagonal slashes from the top left and top right.

The moment Betrayer Mk. II crossed with the tailed dead one’s curved sword, he used Reject. The dread knight was at his most valuable when he didn’t face his enemies straight out. Where a warrior would lock blades with the enemy, a dread knight wouldn’t. He would push them away in an instant, or turn the blow aside.

This time, Ranta skillfully pushed it back. Then, at the same time, he fell straight back. Though he was falling back, he did it at an incredible speed.

“Exhaust!”

The tailed dead one stumbled a little, but managed to brace itself. Ranta kicked off the ground.

This time, he was moving forward. Again, at an incredible speed.

“Take this! Leap Out!”

Ranta charged straight into the tailed dead one. With that timing, it couldn’t hope to dodge.

Betrayer Mk. II slammed into the tailed dead one’s solar plexus. It pierced

through—or maybe not. Ranta was in a position to push the tailed dead down. But instead, he immediately jumped back.

“Dammit!”

“Hashaah!” The tailed dead one leaped to its feet, swinging around its curved sword. It seemed more energetic than before.

Kuzaku deflected the curved sword with a loud clang, then tackled the tailed dead one with a shout. The tailed dead was flipped over, but it still rose.

“Shih! Hyahhh!”

“Geez, what is that thing?!” Yume shouted.

Honestly, what was it?

“How’s this thing supposed to be a dead one?!” Ranta clicked his tongue. “Looks pretty damn lively to me!”

Their attacks weren’t working—maybe? The tailed dead one had a black stain on its stomach. Ranta’s Betrayer Mk. II had pierced its chain mail, injuring the tailed dead one. It had taken a blow to the head from Kuzaku’s longsword, and he’d tackled it, too. But it was still fine.

Wasn’t it in pain? Did it not feel pain? Because it was in an excited state? Or was it just dense? Whatever the case, it was probably best to assume that thing had no sense of pain.

First, they had to break its stance. Then they had to pummel it until it stopped moving.

Long ago, Haruhiro and the others had made regular trips to the Old City of Damuro, hunting goblins that seemed weaker than them. That strategy of ganging up on an enemy and pulverizing them had earned them their nickname, the Goblin Slayers. They just had to do that here.

Haruhiro conveniently happened to be behind it. It was so distracted by Kuzaku and Ranta, it had probably forgotten Haruhiro existed.

That wasn’t a coincidence. Haruhiro had been moving sneakily to make sure it would forget him.

Backstab? Spider? No. Haruhiro chose another move. He ran in, keeping his footsteps as silent as possible. It hadn't noticed him yet. It didn't turn.

Then, as if he was thinking, *Good*, Haruhiro stepped in hard. He performed a jumping kick. He kicked the tailed dead one in the back with both feet.

"Fungoh!" The tailed dead one pitched forward.

"Now!" Haruhiro shouted, but Ranta was already on the move by then. Kuzaku wasn't far behind him. Haruhiro joined in, too.

Don't let it stand up. Knock its weapon from its hands. Shut down all resistance. Don't think about slashing, or stabbing, or anything advanced like that. Ignore the fact we're using swords, and pummel it.

Of the three of them, Ranta was the most used to this. He used the tip of his sword to peel off the thing's helmet.

Crush it. Its head. Make a bloody, pulpy mess out of it. Don't you move. Stop struggling. You're doing that again? You're gonna do that again? Well, no helping it, then. We'll have to go all the way.

Kuzaku pressed his shield down on it. "Ahhhhh!"

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrgh!" Ranta stabbed Betrayer Mk. II into its neck. Then, after his twisting and cutting it off with brute force, it finally stopped moving.

Inhaling sharply, Haruhiro backed away, looking around the area. He spotted Yume, Shihoru, and Merry. Merry made the sign of the hexagram, closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded. That apparently meant everything was okay.

"Yeahhhhhhhhh!" Ranta lifted Betrayer Mk. II up high, letting out a victory cry. Then, in an instant, he jumped on the tailed dead one's corpse. "Treasure, treasure! Mine, mine, miiiine! If you ain't got nothing, I'll make you pay for it, you worthless dead one! I'll seriously kill you!"

"...Come on, man." Haruhiro wanted to say something, but he realized he didn't really have the right to.

Still, the technique Ranta used to strip off the thing's chain mail was beyond impressive. Haruhiro could even have called it brilliant, but he didn't want to compliment him.

“Hm?” Ranta picked up something between his fingers. “Hey, hey, hey, hey, heyyyyy?!”

Kuzaku raised his visor, letting out a sigh. “What? Did you find something good?”

“Ta-dah!” Ranta proudly displayed it. “Not just something!”

Honestly, Haruhiro’s heart skipped a beat.

This might be love, he thought. Yeah, no.

There was more than one of the things Ranta had clenched in his hand. There were multiple of them. Black, and round...

“Wow...” Yume’s mouth hung open.

“...Huh?” Shihoru was still half-doubting what she saw.

“What is it?” Merry tilted her head to the side.

“They’re black coins, you silly! Oh, and...!” Right now, Ranta was beaming more than he ever had in his life. “Four! Count ’em! Four of them! Thanks!”

Haruhiro nearly smiled, but he stopped himself. Before they relaxed and celebrated, there were things to do first. If he didn’t force himself to think that way, he was going to lose all his tension.

Still, four black coins, huh? he thought. Looking at them, they’re medium-sized coins. That’s 4 ruma.

Haruhiro had to check himself lest he start counting his chickens before they hatched.

Steady. Take it slow and steady, he told himself. Use methods that provide certainty.

He didn’t want to celebrate for no reason. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, then have them dashed. He would have to get along with that frail side of himself, and keep on going.

9. Confession Etiquette



Though they were all called dead ones, they came in a multitude of different forms.

Kuzaku struck a dead one in the face using Bash. The dead one's head shot back, but its four arms still reached out trying to grab Kuzaku.

Ranta came in from the right, and Yume from the left, both charging into a dead one. Betrayer Mk. II and Yume's machete stabbed into its flanks.

With the dead one coughing and sputtering, and a sharp glint in its two white eyes as it spewed a brown mucus from its gash-like mouth, Haruhiro grappled it from behind, stabbing his short sword through its neck.

Slashing one up like this wasn't enough to kill a dead one. Or to stop it, rather. The dead ones didn't stop until they were completely dead.

Shouting with exertion, Haruhiro moved his sword around as he twisted the dead one's neck. Back and forth, left and right, violently. It snapped. Or rather, it came off. The strength suddenly drained away from the dead one's body. It collapsed. Backwards.

Haruhiro hurriedly got away from it, losing his balance and landing on his rump. He was about to throw away the dead one's severed head, but he thought better of it, instead placing it on the ground.

"Aww, yeah! It's looting time!" Ranta boldly assaulted the dead one's remains.

Haruhiro always found himself thinking this, but couldn't he be a little less crass about it?

"Haruhiro-kun!" Shihoru pointed into the mist with her staff.

Merry was quickly beside her, short staff at the ready.

Kuzaku, through labored breaths, hefted his shield once more, spinning his right arm, which held his long sword, around once for exercise.

Another one, huh, thought Haruhiro, rising to his feet with a sigh. “Ranta, how was it?”

“Hold on, damn it!” Ranta let out a vulgar little laugh. “Okay, we’ve got two medium-sized coins and one small one! That’s 2 ruma and 1 wen! Not half bad, if I do say so myself!”

“If you’re done there, try gettin’ ready to help!” Yume nudged Ranta in the back with her knee.

“Hey, don’t kick me, Tiny Tits!”

“Kehe...” Zodiac-kun put in. “Whatever, just hurry... You lowlife... Kehehe...”

“Zodiac-kun! Where do you get off calling me, your summoner and master, a lowlife?!” Ranta screamed.

“It suits you...” Haruhiro squinted his eyes.

It was coming. White eyes. It was a dead one. Running towards them. This dead one was crablike, somehow. It reminded him of the giant crab grocer. That’d make the thing hard to fight, but he couldn’t afford to say that.

“It looks tough, so be careful!” Haruhiro called.

The dead ones came in a multitude of forms. But there were things they all had in common. In terms of appearance, it was their eyes. Dead ones had white eyes. It wasn’t that they didn’t have an iris, or anything like that, but it was almost like their eye sockets had been filled in with some white liquid. When they died, their eyes returned to normal, so it was apparently some part of the process that had changed them into dead ones.

Also, it seemed that the dead ones really didn’t feel pain. Thanks to that, short of killing them by destroying their heart or brain, or chopping their heads off, they would keep on going.

The other thing all of them had in common was that they were cannibals. Dead ones didn’t move in groups. It seemed dead ones saw other dead ones as

their enemies, or rather their prey.

It had been seven days since Haruhiro and the others had started commuting to and from the City of the Dead Ones. In that time, they had witnessed the dead ones feeding on a number of occasions. Each time, it had been a dead one eating another dead one.

The dead ones attacked one another, and the victor would feed on the defeated dead one's flesh and innards, stealing any usable equipment. Then they took the defeated dead one's black coins for themselves. This was typical dead one behavior. Or rather, they had yet to encounter a single dead one that acted differently.

If all of the dead ones were like this, then the City of the Dead Ones was a particularly nice target for Haruhiro and the others, who had found themselves forced to continue on as volunteer soldiers, even now that they had come to this gloomy and dangerous new world.

There were many different types of dead ones. That meant there was a wide variance in each one's combat abilities. There might be dead ones that were so incredibly strong that Haruhiro and the others couldn't possibly hope to defeat them, and they could very well run into one like that tomorrow... no, today.

So there were risks, of course. However, generally, they wouldn't need to plan for a battle against multiple dead ones. That was because not only did the dead ones not form groups, they were actively targeting one another.

Surprisingly, when a dead one had the choice of attacking Haruhiro and the party or another dead one, it would choose the other dead one. When two dead ones were fighting, that was an excellent opportunity to take advantage. Sure, it was a horrible thing to do, but being a volunteer soldier had always been a dirty job, one where ethical considerations didn't factor into things. This wasn't a trade Haruhiro could recommend to anyone who was a good person, or who liked to think of themselves as a good person.

In any case, both dead ones would ignore Haruhiro and the others, fully focused on defeating the other dead one and devouring it. That being the case, Haruhiro and the others could swarm the two dead ones who had eyes only for each other and kill them both.

Even if they didn't say it out loud, most volunteer soldiers would think this afterwards: *Thanks for the free meal.*

Incidentally, those like Haruhiro who were not so insensitive to what they were doing, though they might have been cowardly about it, made excuses for themselves. It wasn't that they felt what they were doing was okay and they had no doubts about it. *I have to do this to survive*, they told themselves to assuage their consciences, until eventually they got used to it. Even if they returned to their senses and became sickened with themselves occasionally, they probably would forget it again by the time the next day came.

With their seventh day of hunting in the City of the Dead Ones finished, their party returned to Well Village.

Today they had collected 9 ruma and 11 wen. The dead ones' equipment was in incredibly bad shape, and any given piece was usually only worth 1 wen, so they didn't bother bringing it back unless it looked particularly good.

Their shared assets had exceeded 20 ruma, and they should have each accrued several ruma in personal assets since they'd started splitting the money between them three days ago. Food still cost 1 ruma for the six of them, so with two meals a day for 2 ruma, they had a fair bit of leeway in their spending now.

Today, while the girls were bathing, Ranta started drinking at the grocery store.

That's right. The grocery store had alcohol.

There were a number of varieties of alcohol that came in jugs, and the cheap ones were 1 wen. Haruhiro didn't think much of the flavor, but Ranta was a real fan of it, and he'd been drinking a lot recently. It was a real possibility that the vast majority of Ranta's money was being spent on alcohol.

That being the case, Haruhiro and Kuzaku decided to ditch the totally-sloshed Ranta and take a bath by themselves when the girls were finished.

The hole in the riverbed they were using as a bath had been dug in a spot where the residents of Well Village were unlikely to look. It had made their hearts race when they had bathed at first, but now they just got naked, and they uncovered their faces, too. They kept their helmets or whatever else close

at hand, just to be safe; if anyone came near, they could just cover themselves quickly. It hadn't caused any problems yet, so it was probably fine.

The guys didn't care that much about being naked together anymore. Even with their eyes adjusted to the darkness, it was still dark. So long as they didn't try too hard to see anything, they wouldn't be able to see anything.

First they washed their hands and faces in the Lukewarm River. For some reason the grocery store sold soap, so that was convenient. They washed the rest of their bodies quickly, too. Then, finally, they sank into the bath.

The water of the Lukewarm River was lower than body temperature; it was, just as the name they'd given it said, lukewarm. They would have loved to take a hot bath, but if they started demanding luxuries like that, there would be no end to it.

"Whew..." Haruhiro slowly turned his head from side to side. He massaged his own shoulders. If he sat with his butt touching the bottom of the bath, the water was deep enough to come up to Haruhiro's shoulders. He could stretch out his legs, too. However, it was a bit cramped for Kuzaku with his bigger body. Being tall wasn't always so great. Haruhiro was still just a tiny bit jealous, though.

"Maaan." Kuzaku rubbed his face with both hands. "Y'know, today was kinda... I dunno. Well... Yeah. Today was pretty exhausting, huh..."

"Sure was," Haruhiro agreed. "You did good work. You must be tired."

"Oh, no, it must have been way more tiring for you. Compared to me, at least."

"You're the one out there putting your neck on the line, Kuzaku. I'm just, y'know, hanging out in the back."

"You're using your head," Kuzaku contradicted. "That's hard work, isn't it? In a way. Me, I just do whatever you tell me to. As long as I do that, it all works out somehow. Like, you must be setting things up so that can happen, right?"

"It's because you're doing a good job in your role as a tank."

"You serious? I'm doing a good job?"

“You are, man.”

“Nah, I’ve got a long way to go. I’m not that great.”

“I’m pretty serious about my compliments, you know,” Haruhiro said. “You’re pretty picky with yourself.”

“A little, yeah...” Kuzaku suddenly went quiet. There was an odd pause before he spoke again. “...Umm, I don’t get the chance to do this often—talking to you alone like this, I mean. Do you mind if I ask something?”

“Huh? Oh, sure,” Haruhiro said. “...Wh-What?”

“It’s about Moguzo.”

“...Moguzo?”

Oh, that’s what it’s about, Haruhiro thought, but then also thought, *If not that, what would he ask about?*

Anyway, the question had caught him off guard. He hadn’t expected to hear Moguzo’s name from Kuzaku.

“Sure, I don’t mind. Of course not. But, Kuzaku, um... You never, well, you didn’t have anything to do with Moguzo, not directly at least, right?”

“Well, no. I know who the guy was, though.”

“...Does it bother you?” Haruhiro asked.

“Like, you guys never talk about it. Like, you never compare me to Moguzo, right? At the very least, you never tell me when you do.”

“I wouldn’t... no.”

“But, y’know, I think about that stuff. Like, there’s no way you aren’t comparing me to him. I wonder things like, ‘Am I doing as well as Moguzo?’ Or ‘Am I managing to fill the hole he left?’ Sorry.”

“No... No need to apologize out of nowhere.”

“No, I was just thinking, it’s not right to talk about me filling the hole. That’s not a thing I can fill. It’s not a thing that can be filled. That’s how it is with comrades, isn’t it? Me, after the time I’ve been with you guys, I can feel it. Irreplaceable, that’s the word I’m looking for. That’s what comrades are, yeah.

This isn't the best way to say it, but just because one guy dies, you can't let another guy in to replace him. It's not that simple. Even if you're forced to do it, it feels wrong, you could say. I can't really word it right. Like, I can't ever be Moguzo's replacement. But, on the other hand, I want to find a way to protect you all, in a different way than Moguzo did. I'm a paladin, even if I'm not a great one, so, like, I feel like I've gotta protect you all."

"...Man..."

Oh, this is no good, Haruhiro thought. He splashed water on his face. *What the hell, man? Cut that out. You're blindsiding me here. I don't know what to say. I'm not good at this stuff.*

It wasn't that Kuzaku had just gradually been getting used to his role and growing as a tank naturally. While sensing a high wall called Moguzo that he couldn't see, he had been facing the enemy and himself, and fighting with everything he had. He had a firm sense of purpose, shedding blood for his comrades as he improved himself step by step with painstaking effort.

Had Haruhiro been able to see that?

Had Haruhiro been able to understand the struggles that Kuzaku was going through?

There was no way he could say he had. His mind had been too busy elsewhere. Basically, he had a hard enough time taking care of himself. Enough excuses, though. The fact of the matter was, Haruhiro hadn't been giving Kuzaku all of the credit he was due.

Sorry for being so hopeless as a leader, and for coming up short in so many ways, Haruhiro thought dispiritedly.

It would be easy to bow his head. But what good could come from apologizing to Kuzaku? Haruhiro might feel better if he did, but that was probably all it would accomplish. It was pure self-satisfaction.

"Moguzo was..." Haruhiro pinched his nose and breathed through his mouth.

Oh, damn. I think I'm gonna cry. No, I'm fine. I can hold it in.

"He was an important comrade. Yeah. I don't think he can be replaced. We

can't forget him, and we won't. But still... He died. He's gone. Moguzo's gone now. I don't want to say that's why, but now—Kuzaku, you're our party's tank, and I think you're the only one who can be."

"...Whoa."

"Huh?"

"Ha ha..." Kuzaku covered his face with his big hands. "I'm tearing up here. What a laugh..."

"I won't laugh at you, though..."

"Honestly, it'd be better if you would," Kuzaku said. "Man, this is embarrassing."

"No, it's not."

"Could you do me a favor and not tell anyone about this? Especially Rantakun."

"...You think I would?"

"Nah, I don't. Just saying it to be safe."

"I won't talk about it." For no real reason, Haruhiro used his finger to flick some water in Kuzaku's direction.

"Hey!" Kuzaku splashed him back. "What was that for? You're like a kid!"

"No, you are."

"You started it."

"I won't do it again, okay?"

"You swear?"

"I swear, I swear," Haruhiro said, then immediately scooped up some water and dumped it on Kuzaku's head.

"I knew you'd do that!" Kuzaku immediately retaliated.

What the heck are we doing...? Haruhiro started to feel silly, and decided to stop the splash fight, but it still took a while before that happened. Honestly, what were they doing?

But it was fun. It was so stupid, he couldn't help but laugh. Right now, he felt like he could talk about it.

I should ask him about it directly, Haruhiro thought. He needed to make things clear. Weird as it sounded, he honestly wanted Kuzaku to find happiness.

Was that an exaggeration? No, he didn't think so. For the time being, Haruhiro and the others were going to be stuck living here. What if that lasted for a year, two years, five years, a decade, or even more than that? They couldn't go on as volunteer soldiers forever, doing nothing but hunting, eating, and sleeping. They needed to have some kind of life outside of that, too. They could get permission from the residents of Well Village to build a house for themselves inside the village, for instance. Or, with an eye to the future, they could find jobs other than hunting.

If both sides wanted it, they could pair off into couples. If there were children born as a result, they could all protect and nurture them together, and that might work to motivate them all.

The way things stood, that was all a dream, a wispy figment of his imagination, but it could happen. It wouldn't be strange for anything to happen.

"Listen, Kuzaku," Haruhiro said. "You mind if I ask something, too... maybe?"

"Sure. What?"

"It's kind of personal, though."

"Don't hold back. You and me are pals, man. —No, maybe I got carried away there. Acting in such an embarrassing way again..."

"Now it's really hard for me to say it..."

"I know, right?" Kuzaku said. "Sorry. Oh, but seriously, you can ask me anything. I don't think I'm hiding anything."

"W-Well, then." Haruhiro cleared his throat.

What is this? A ringing in my ears? Something like that? Or is it something else? I'm ridiculously tense. How do I bring it up? I'm not good at talking about this stuff. But then, do I have anything I'm good at? Not really, huh. Yeah, I've got nothing. Oh, well. It's fine being normal. I'll ask him straight. That's the only

way.

“H-How are things? With M-M-M... M-Merry?”

He stuttered. Stuttered like crazy. He’d wanted to do it subtly, like it was no big deal. He couldn’t. In the end, it was impossible. This was the best Haruhiro could manage.

“Uhh...” Kuzaku bit his upper lip with his lower teeth. It was a kind of dexterous display, as far as lip biting went. “What do you mean, how are things?”

“Huh?” Haruhiro faltered. “But. You know, um... What? Huh? I mean, you know? Kuzaku, you and Merry are... Well, you’re, um...”

“What’s this about Merry... -san and me?”

“H-Huh? Y-You’re... mad?” Haruhiro asked.

“No, I’m not mad.”

“No, but, somehow, you seem sorta upset...”

“No, man, I’m not upset, okay?”



“No, no, you totally are, aren’t you? I mean, you look super unhappy.”

“That’s not it... Ngahh.” Kuzaku started banging himself on the head with both his hands. “Guhh. How do I even explain it? It’s not like that, seriously. I’m not mad. Besides, what about Merry and meeee? What are you trying to sayyyy? Aghhhh.”

“Wh-Whoa, Kuzaku, calm down, man.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” Kuzaku snapped.

“I can tell. You’re clearly not calm. You look like you’re losing your mind. Huh? Wh-Why? I mean, you and Merry are going o—”

“I get it! I’ll tell you the whole story, okay?” Kuzaku broke in, using large gestures as he spoke. “Look, a lot of stuff happened between Merry... -san and me. No, nothing really. I thought she’s pretty great. Honestly, you know how it goes. I had a thing for her.”

“...Yeah.”

“I mean, she’s not just beautiful, she’s funny, too. I dunno, she’s serious, but there’s something kind of unreliable about her. Unreliable? No, that’s not it. What is it? She’s cute.”

“...Oh, yeah... I guess.”

“I think so,” Kuzaku said. “So, well, that’s why I fell for her. I had the chance to talk to her alone sometimes, so I was sort of dropping hints about that.”

“...Like when we were at the Lonesome Field Outpost?”

“Huh? You knew about it? You noticed?”

“...Yeah, kinda.”

“Well, I dunno what to say,” Kuzaku said. “She’s probably the type that gives in if you push a little, you know. Insecure, I guess you could say. So, when I said I wanted her advice on stuff that was worrying me, she was willing to hear me out, you know. Also, me and Merry... -san, we both joined the group after everyone else. We had that in common, so there was that, too.”

“...I see.”

"It felt like things were going well. Like, 'Maybe she's got a soft spot for me. Things are looking good, huh?' That's what I thought."

"...That's what you thought."

"Right! That's what I thought. So, of course, I had to go for it."

"...Go for what?"

"A confession, of course."

"...You confessed to her?"

"Darn straight I did," Kuzaku said firmly. "I mean, I couldn't just leave things vague forever. That wouldn't feel good. For either of us."

"...Is that... how it is?"

"It's different for everyone," Kuzaku said. "For me, though, if I see a chance and it feels right, I go for it."

"Did you... take her aside?" Haruhiro asked.

"It was going to be a long talk, after all. That was at the Lonesome Field Outpost."

"...That one time, before we went back to Alterna?"

"Yeah. Huh? Why do you know about that? Oh, that time, you weren't in the tent, huh. Were you outside watching, maybe?"

"...A little, yeah."

"Urgh. You saw that, huh. How embarrassing. Yeah, it was just after that. I went and confessed to Merry... -san. I thought it'd work, too. I got an immediate response."

"...Immediate?" Haruhiro asked.

"When it comes to that sort of stuff, she's really cut and dry about it. If I think back, she'd kept firm boundaries, you know. I was just misunderstanding, you could say, or it was all me being overly optimistic. I thought there was a good mood between the two of us."

"...And?"

“It went like this.” Kuzaku tucked in his chin, shaking his head left and right a little. ““No.””

“...Was that supposed to be your imitation of Merry?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah. It’s just like her, if I do say so myself. It was a one-word response, after all. Of course, she explained it to me after that. It was like, since we’re comrades, she could be my friend, but nothing more than that. She’s not interested now. She didn’t want the distraction. Merry... -san, she was apologetic, and it made me feel bad for putting her in that position. So, I was like, ‘Sorry for making this awkward. Please, let’s just keep things the way they’ve always been.’ We agreed to do that.”

“...So then...” Haruhiro said slowly. He finished silently: *...the two of them are —not going out? Is that it? Maybe...?*

Haruhiro noticed that he was sinking. The water reached his chin. Then his mouth. Then all the way up to his nose. *Hey, you’re going to drown*, he warned himself.

“Haruhiro...?” Kuzaku asked, concerned.

“Ahh!” Haruhiro hurriedly pushed himself up out of the water, avoiding death by drowning. “So that’s how it was. Oh... I... I see. Man, I thought... I dunno, you two were just keeping quiet about it, or something... I was... wrong, huh?”

“If it’d worked out, I was planning to tell you all,” Kuzaku said. “It’d be awkward keeping something like that quiet. Like, if you had people sneaking around behind your back, wouldn’t that be kind of unpleasant?”

“I might not be happy about it... no,” Haruhiro said. “You’re right.”

“It’s too bad for me that I didn’t get to make my big announcement.”

“...Well, yeah.”

“Oh, are you trying to console me?”

“...Kinda?”

“It’s fine, man. I’m already over it. I mean, sure, I still love her, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me at all. But we’ve got bigger concerns.”

“Yeah...” Haruhiro murmured.

“I can do without romance. For now, at least. I’ll leave that to Ranta-kun. Though he might be looking for something different.”

“In his case, it’s more primitive, almost childish...”

“He’s just honest with himself,” Kuzaku said. “I like that about him.”

“Me, I don’t like it all that much.”

Kuzaku laughed, rubbing his face a few times with his big hands. He probably wasn’t as over it as he’d said. That was what Haruhiro figured. That said, the guy didn’t need to be comforted. Kuzaku was facing forward.

How was Haruhiro, compared to that?

He thought about it. *I don’t really know, but, for now, maybe I’m a little too relieved...? Why do I feel so relieved right now?*

10. Plus and Minus



Not only was the City of the Dead Ones larger than Well Village, it was probably larger than Alterna, too. It must have been a pretty big city before it was reduced to ruins. Naturally, that meant many people had once lived here. It had been more than a few thousand. Perhaps an order of magnitude more than that—tens of thousands of people—had lived here.

There was a large, castle-like structure in the center of the city. Haruhiro thought of it as castle-like, but, well, it was probably a castle. From the looks of it, the castle was composed of a main tower surrounded by eight other towers, but three of those towers had collapsed completely, and two of them were halfway gone. The main tower was hardly broken at all, but opening its rusted metal doors and setting foot inside would take a lot of courage. Besides, how would they open those doors when they wouldn't budge in the slightest from a little pushing or pulling?

When they circled around the castle, they found two back entrances, but they still couldn't convince themselves to try going inside. It was just plain too scary.

There were three cobblestone roads leading out from the castle heading north, south, and west. Each of them had a plaza along the way. These main roads and plazas were bizarrely empty, and they rarely spotted dead ones near them. To put it the opposite way, the main roads and the plazas were relatively safe.

On the north side of the city, there were many buildings that were either half destroyed or almost completely destroyed. Furthermore, the closer to the Lukewarm River they were, the heavier the damage to the buildings was.

To the south of the castle, the streets were largely intact. In the Southwest Quarter in particular, the place looked like it would be pretty livable if only the

dead ones weren't around. Though, realistically speaking, there was no chance of the party living there. If they came across a relatively solid building, it was safe to assume there was a dead one inside. It seemed that they needed rest, too, and the party occasionally spotted dead ones sleeping in the back alleyways or behind the rubble. However, dead ones would wake at the slightest disturbance, so it was difficult to attack them in their sleep.

What did the dead ones do inside those buildings? They didn't actually know, but even if they were asleep, the slightest noise would rouse them. Then they would viciously attack the intruders. If the party didn't want any nasty surprises, it was best to stay out of the buildings in the City of the Dead Ones.

The fog from the Lukewarm River hung thick over the eastern half of the city, making visibility incredibly poor. That was why Haruhiro and the others lurked around the western half of the city, searching for dead ones.

In particular, the remains of the marketplace in the Northwest Quarter, or the Warehouse District, where there were the remains of a row of large buildings that looked like warehouses, made good targets.

It seemed there was a class system, or rather some sort of ranks, among the dead ones, too. The Northeast Quarter had nothing but weak dead ones, with the Northwest Quarter being the next step up from that, followed by the Southeast Quarter, and finally the Southwest Quarter. Their numbers followed the opposite trend, with dead ones being most plentiful in the Southwest Quarter, with decreasing numbers in the Southeast Quarter, Northwest Quarter, and finally Northeast Quarter.

For cannibals like the dead ones, the more densely populated areas made finding prey easier. That meant there was a lot of competition over them. It was survival of the fittest, so that might mean only the strong dead ones survived.

The weak had their own ways of fighting, though. If they knew their limits and went searching for prey they could defeat, the lowest level of dead ones would arrive in the Northeast Quarter. There they would only find weaklings like themselves. As they ate and devoured the weak, they would grow in confidence. Dissatisfied with the lack of prey, they would head towards the Northwest Quarter. If they survived there, they would move on to the

Southeast Quarter. Ultimately, they would go to the Southwest Quarter where the experienced dead ones gathered, fought, and fed.

Haruhiro and the others did their best to avoid the Southwest Quarter. It was swarming with dead ones to the point it was ridiculous, and the way they fought was fierce, or rather, extreme. Those dead ones would use anything that came to hand as a throwing weapon, and they had a fondness for sneak attacks. They'd try to take you out with a single blow, then flee if that failed. The *powerful dead ones* of the Southwest Quarter were crafty as a general rule.

Of course, there were powerful dead ones so fierce that they stood out from the pack, too.

One time, they saw a powerful dead one feeding from afar. It was totally crazy. It looked like a lion on its hind legs, standing about three to three and a half meters tall. It punched a bearlike powerful dead one that was bigger than it, knocking it down with a series of two kicks, then easily lifting its massive body up.

In the next moment, Haruhiro doubted his own eyes. The lion powerful dead one easily tore the bear powerful dead one in two. Just how strong was it?

While bathing in a shower of blood, it trembled with unmistakable delight as it laughed loudly. It was more than just terrifying. If they approached it, they would be killed in an instant. It was pretty likely it would kill them even if they didn't.

That being the case, the Southwest Quarter of the town was too dangerous. The dead ones of the Southeast Quarter were, too. They would sneak up on you in the dense mist, making them pretty nasty to deal with. And there were just too few of the dead ones in the Northeast Quarter. Therefore, it had been decided that the Northwest Quarter was just right.

Honestly, the Northwest Quarter of the City of the Dead Ones couldn't have been more perfect for Haruhiro and the group. It would have been fair to call it the ideal hunting ground.

First, he eliminated his presence with Hide. Second, he moved with his presence eliminated with Swing. Third, he utilized all of his senses to detect the presences of others with Sense.

Using the secret art of thieves, Stealth, to its fullest, Haruhiro moved forward like a shadow.

While he was using Stealth, Haruhiro's knees and elbows were never stiff. They were always bending smoothly. He lowered his hips, arched his back, and didn't let his neck stiffen. He was ready to respond to any kind of shock at any time. He maintained a posture that allowed him to breathe as his feet plodded onward without hesitation.

Instead of focusing his attention on one point, Haruhiro looked at the whole picture. It felt like his eyes had pulled into the back of his skull. He was actually using eye motions and slight turns of his head to expand his field of vision. If this was done properly, he could even see behind him where he wasn't supposed to be able to.

He didn't listen with his ears alone. He felt sound with his entire body. He turned his whole body into a sensor, and with it he picked up not just sound, but every stimulus, every single kind of change.

He spotted a dead one poking its head out of the remains of a building in the Warehouse District and looking left and right.

Should we all attack it together? Haruhiro wondered.

It was common for a dead one in the Northwest Quarter to run away as soon as it sensed it was at a disadvantage, though. Especially a dead one like this, which was close to Ranta's size. It wore a helmet and light-looking armor and carried a short halberd-like weapon, but there was something that seemed frightened and hesitant about it. It didn't look that strong.

That didn't guarantee it was weak, but it looked like it might flee, so Haruhiro decided he was going to circle around behind it. If he was able to finish it off, good. If he didn't seem like he'd be able to, he could chase it to where his comrades lay waiting.

Ranta was the only one who had been against this plan. That meant they were going through with it.

So, right now, Haruhiro was closing in on the dead one's back.

It was less than ten meters away. Eight meters. No, even as he was thinking

all this, Haruhiro was still on the move, so it was already around seven meters away. Six meters.

If he said he didn't feel tense in the slightest, that would have been a lie. But when he had his target's back in sight, it was strangely calming. That might have been part of his nature as a thief. Or perhaps it was just Haruhiro. He often read the backs of living creatures. Even in more tense situations when he couldn't afford to calmly observe them, their backs provided Haruhiro with a lot of information.

The easiest thing to understand was whether they were a liar or not. Whether they were honest or crooked might have been another way to put it. Were they guileless or a schemer? Were they trustworthy or not?

This dead one was a liar and dishonest, the untrustworthy sort that tried to lure its opponents into traps. Haruhiro could sense that from the way it leaned, the warped way it held itself. But the dead one was also shallow. It told obvious lies. It relied on its nose to sniff out stupid prey that would still fall for its ruse. If it didn't think it could win, it wouldn't hesitate for a moment before fleeing.

Sorry, Haruhiro thought, but I'm not going to let you do that.

He silently drew his short sword. Its sheath was well oiled and maintained.

It was another three, two, one step away. He couldn't let himself think any of those steps were special. If he placed undue special importance on them, his target would notice him.

Here's the trick, Barbara-sensei had once told him. When it comes to hiding, or stealing, or killing, you do them all the same way. In this world, and in any world, nothing is special. You can't think that things are interesting, or that they're boring. You do them all the same way, without any particular attachments.

I can't do that, Barbara-sensei, he had complained, but the mysterious thing was, when it all went well, he sometimes was able to do those things like they were all the same.

Haruhiro approached the dead one from behind like he was hanging over it, then he wrapped his left arm around its head. With a backhanded grip, he

stabbed his short sword into its neck, then gouged it, twisting its whole body to break its neck.

If he let out a sigh of relief here, Barbara-sensei would scold him. No, she wouldn't just shout at him, she'd trip him, put his joints in a lock, and then make him faint in agony. *"Do them all the same way! How many times do I have to tell you this before you get it, Old Cat?!"*

This path was precarious. It was the sort of steep hill where, if he let his guard down, he wouldn't just come to a stop, he'd roll right back down it. He didn't know that he would ever see Barbara-sensei again, but his master's teachings were still alive inside of him.

Probably. No, definitely. He was still persevering along this steep and narrow road, wasn't he?

Yes, the way of the thief!

"Heyyyy. I'm doooone," Haruhiro called.

While he was calling his comrades over, Haruhiro thought he was maybe acting a little off. *Am I getting carried away, maybe? Like, things are going really well with the dead ones of the Northwest Quarter. This hunting ground is way too lucrative. I can work hard as the party leader, while still pushing forward along the way of the thief, even though I'm just doing it all the same way. I can look at it that way, too. In fact, I am doing it all the same way. But, somehow... Yeah. It scares me. It's all been going too smoothly. This isn't what life is like, right?*

"Hey, Parupirorinnosuke!" Ranta jumped in and went to work on the fallen dead one. "Taking one down on your own is too much for an insignificant flea like you!"

"Kehe..." Zodiac-kun put in. "Talking like a human is too much for you, Ranta... Kehe..."

"No, Zodiac-kun, I'm an honest-to-goodness human, okay?! I mean, I'm a respectable human man, all right?!"

Following quickly on Ranta and Zodiac-kun's heels, Yume, Shihoru, Merry, and Kuzaku arrived. They all came to a halt, then backed away from him.

“Huh?” Ranta looked to Yume and the others. “What, guys? What’s wrong? Does my way-too-respectable, special and mature aura intimidate you?”

“...Mature?” Shihoru scoffed as if the idea was ridiculous. “...How?”

“Respectable?” Yume furrowed her brow, stuck out her bottom lip, and made a show of shrugging her shoulders. “How?”

Merry shook her head. “If you call him childish, I’d feel bad for actual children.”

“You’re all in sync, huh?! Perfectly, too! You’re a trio! What kind of threesome are you, huh?!” Ranta shouted at them as he rummaged through the dead one’s possessions. “Well, fine by me! Say whatever you like! I’ve got my soul mate, Zodiac-kun, after all! Huh...?”

“Just now.” Kuzaku pointed above Ranta’s head. “It vanished, man.”

Haruhiro was surprised by that. “...Wow, Zodiac-kun. You learned a trick like that just so you could harass Ranta.”

“N-No!” Ranta jumped to his feet and rounded on Haruhiro. “N-None of you get it, okay?! Zodiac-kun’s not doing it to harass me, or anything like that! He does that as a way of showing his love!”

“What do you mean, ‘he’?” Haruhiro asked. “Honestly, you two seem kind of distant.”

“W-W-We do not! There’s no distance between us. Me and Zodiac-kun are tight. We’ll always be in loooove. You dummy, dummy, dummy!”

“I get it, I get it. I get it already, so go on, keep looting, okay? You like that, don’t you?”

“I do not! I hate, hate, hate it! You do it, you stupid moron!”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll do it, then.”

“Moron! I’m obviously gonna do it! Like I’d ever let you handle it, Parupiro! I’ll do it all! Me! Don’t you forget it, Paruparu!”

“What’s a Paruparu...?”

“Paaaruparuparuparuparuuuu,” Ranta cackled. “Ehehehehe!”

There were times Haruhiro legitimately wanted to murder this piece of crap (and trash). He wouldn't do it, though.

Ranta got back to work, finding two medium-sized coins and three small ones. There was a ring on the dead one's left hand, too. They thought they might be able to sell it, so they decided to take it, as well. Eventually another dead one would come along and clean up the body for them—well, eat it, actually, to be blunt, but they could just leave it here.

"On to the next one," Haruhiro said. When their job was done, it was best to move on.

His comrades knew that, too, so even Ranta did what Haruhiro said without any fuss. They quickly departed, going off to find their next target. They had to return to Well Village before the flame set, so they couldn't afford to waste time.

We're hardly wasting any time, thought Haruhiro. When things are going our way, honestly, everything seems to go well. Although the good times can't last forever.

Don't get carried away, Haruhiro had to remind himself multiple times each day. Stay on your guard. There've got to be pitfalls waiting for us everywhere. This is just a coincidence. It won't last. We don't know what tomorrow will be like. No, even today, right now, misfortune could be coming our way. Someone, maybe even me, could make a horrible mistake.

His eyes met Merry's.

For some reason, Merry smiled at him.

Everything's going well, huh? Haruhiro thought. No, no, no? What am I even thinking? No, no, no. I'm not thinking at all. No, it's not that I'm not thinking, just that I'm not thinking this, or that, or anything in particular about Merry. I don't intend to be thinking anything.

But I can't help but be conscious of her. It's Kuzaku's fault. Of course, Kuzaku didn't do anything wrong. That's not it. It's just Kuzaku opening up to me is what's triggered it, that's all.

Haruhiro was, of course, the party leader, so it was wrong for him to have

unique, or special, feelings of that sort for a single party member like Merry. It probably wasn't a good thing.

—Or that's how it feels. Right? That's gotta be right, right?

But Akira-san and Miho were married, he reminded himself. That was an inter-party romance. There were Gogh and Kayo, too. Those two even had an adopted son.

When he thought about it a bit, Haruhiro started to feel like, after going through so much danger together, it was perfectly natural that those sorts of feelings would sprout between them, and that they would form a strong bond. Besides, when he thought about a relationship with someone outside the party, it didn't really feel realistic. In fact, it didn't feel realistic at all. Well, there were people like Mimorin, but he didn't have romantic feelings for her, and they might never meet again anyway.

In that case—No, no, no, what am I thinking? In that case, nothing! I'm getting a little too giddy, maybe? I need to seriously, diligently, earnestly focus on my job as leader. Because I'm awkward.

Honestly, I'm not good at this stuff. Doing this and doing that at the same time—it's all beyond me. If I don't focus on just one thing, my head gets all jumbled up.

Haruhiro came to a stop on a narrow road in the Warehouse District.

Haruhiro the thief took point. Kuzaku was ready to step in if needed. Behind them was Yume. Merry was somewhere she could protect Shihoru, and Ranta brought up the rear. This was their basic formation for exploring the City of the Dead Ones.

"...Haruhiro?" Kuzaku already had his longsword and his shield at the ready.

"Meow?" Yume let out a weird noise, looking around the area.

"Huhhhh? Whaaaat?" Ranta turned to look behind him.

Shihoru inhaled sharply and shrank into herself.

Merry immediately got into a position to protect Shihoru, lowering her posture. Merry was awfully gallant at times like this. It was a hard fact to deny,

but he didn't have time to stare admiringly at her.

The blood instantly drained from Haruhiro's face. He wasn't even sure himself how he had managed to react. Anyway, he threw himself forward. Before he could do a roll, he heard some massive object impacting the ground right behind him, and he felt a shockwave.

"Run for it!" Haruhiro shouted without checking to see what it was. Where had it come down from? The sky? Well, the buildings around here were relatively intact. It must have been lurking on some nearby roof, aiming for Haruhiro and the others.

Haruhiro and the others, or just Haruhiro?

It was coming. Charging at him. Scary!

Haruhiro ran. He dashed at top speed, turning around a corner. The only thing he knew about his enemy was that it was a dead one, and it was pretty big, but he figured with its large size, maybe it couldn't make tight turns? That was the hope.

Just like he'd thought, it couldn't turn suddenly, and it made a wider turn. That put some distance between them, so Haruhiro was able to take a look at his pursuer, even if it wasn't a very good one.

Aw, man, he thought. It sure looks like a lion. I had a feeling it would, but it looks lion-y. Like a lion standing on its hind legs. That's what it looks like.

But it's a little, no, a lot smaller than the lion we saw that one time, isn't it? Maybe it only looks that way because I want to think that? No, for real, it's small, right?

If that had been the powerful dead one that looked like a lion, Haruhiro would be long dead by now. It was certainly scary. He thought his stomach was going to jump out of his throat, because it was ridiculously scary, but he wouldn't be getting off this lightly if the one behind him was the real deal. If it had been, Haruhiro would probably cower, unable to move until it gobbled him up. That was just how crazy the lion powerful dead one had been. This one wasn't that bad.

Haruhiro went into an alley and jumped inside a building through a collapsing

wall. What were his comrades doing? Had they gotten away all right? Haruhiro didn't think they were heartless enough to abandon him.

They wouldn't run away, I think. They probably wouldn't run away. They wouldn't run away on me, I'm sure of it.

It—the probably-not-so-powerful lion dead one—was diligently chasing after Haruhiro.

Haruhiro left the building through the entrance. The lion dead one bounded after him. He couldn't outrun it. That thing had to be faster than him.

"Haruhiroooo...!" He heard Ranta's voice.

Still, I'm amazed I managed to dodge it the first time that thing jumped at me, Haruhiro thought as he rolled inside another large building.

It had two floors. There were stairs. He raced up them. They were wooden. Weak stairs. They gave in, and his foot almost got trapped. He didn't care. He took the stairs two at a time and kept going up.

The lion dead one destroyed the stairs as it tried to go up, then let out a roar.

Haruhiro made it to the second floor. There was a window. He could see outside through it. Ranta was there. Kuzaku was there. Yume, Shihoru, and Merry, too. They were running this way. None of them had noticed Haruhiro on the second floor yet.

Haruhiro leaned out the window. "Run away! Come on, run away!"

"Whaa...?!" Ranta looked up at Haruhiro, then immediately waved to him. "Man, get down here already! It's inside, too, right?!"

Haruhiro couldn't argue back. The lion dead one was still trying to get up to the second floor. Even if the stairs had completely collapsed, it would eventually get up here. Ranta was right. For once.

Haruhiro—did not jump out the window. He didn't have that kind of guts. He straddled the window frame, got a firm grip on it with his hands, then hung down. From that position, he let go. He didn't feel much of an impact when he touched down; his legs just felt a little numb.

"Come on, let's get outta here, you bunch of bozos!" Ranta had already

started running.

“Who’re you callin’ a booboo!” Yume shouted after him as she ran.

“I didn’t say that, you tiny-titted monster! Hey, girls, if you stay next to that monster, your tits’ll shrivel up and they’ll turn into miserable tiny tits like hers!”

“...You’re the worst, you vile monster man,” Shihoru muttered as she caught up to Yume.

“If I’m the worst, that makes me number one, huh! Hurrah! Hurrah! Gahahaha!”

“I respect that...” Kuzaku ran with his armor clanking.

“No, go all the way and worship me! I’m offering a serious boon! You can become a thousand times more erotic! Gwahehehehehe!”

“That’s not a boon, that’s a negative you’ll never recover from...” Haruhiro forced his slightly numb legs to keep going and caught up to his comrades.

“Haru!” Merry shouted at him.

“Yes?!”

“For that, just now!”

“J-Just now?”

Merry held for a dramatic pause. No, maybe not a dramatic pause, but she didn’t say the next bit for a while.

While they were bantering, the lion dead one stuck its head out the second floor window and roared.

Haruhiro forced himself to speed up, catching up to Merry and turning the corner. At almost exactly that moment, she slapped him hard on the shoulder, startling him.

“You get one demerit!”

“Whaa...?! ”

What did that mean? It felt like he understood, but also like he didn’t.

Merry wouldn’t look him in the eye. Was she mad? Or was she embarrassed?

It might have been both.

11. A Work in Progress



They could find themselves faced with a life-or-death crisis anywhere. If they made one misstep, it would be a catastrophe. There were countless times when that had been true. It would even be fair to call it a daily occurrence.

Haruhiro was lying down, gazing into the campfire. Wrapped in a blanket made of some mystery material that he had bought from the flattened egg with arms that owned the clothing and bag shop, and using his bag as a pillow, he was pretty comfortable.

He was tired and starting to drift off, but not fully asleep yet. This sort of half-and-half state wasn't so bad. It was one luxury he could enjoy. One he couldn't savor without having first secured his safety.

His comrades were all already asleep. While he listened to each of them either breathing shallowly or snoring, he thought idly to himself, *We all managed to make it through another day. That's nice. Everything else aside, it's amazing to have a tomorrow.*

Yume and Merry were asleep, entwined in one another's arms. It seemed when Yume went to sleep, she would snuggle up to anyone who was nearby. Like she was longing for the warmth of another, maybe? Merry didn't seem to mind. Tonight, though, Shihoru was a little ways away from the two of them.

Suddenly, Shihoru got up. "Haruhiro-kun? Are you... awake?"

"...Whuh?" Haruhiro pushed himself up a bit, supporting himself with his elbows. "Uh, yeah."

"There was something I wanted to... talk to you about. Is that okay?"

"...You want to talk? Sure. Yeah, of course we can talk."

It would be a bit awkward to do it where they were, so they walked a ways along the moat of Well Village, then crouched down side-by-side.

“So, what’s up?” Haruhiro asked. “You know, it’s kind of weird, crouching like this...”

“...Yeah. Maybe. Uh... There’re two things. The first is about what happened during the day...” Shihoru stopped, as if it was hard to talk about. “It might not be my place to say this... but, you know, it’s just... really been bothering me...”

“...Sure,” Haruhiro said. “I’ll hear you out. Talk to me.”

“Haruhiro... You don’t value yourself enough, I think.”

“Do... I? Huh? Is that how it looks?”

“It does,” Shihoru told him. “If it came to it, you’d try to sacrifice yourself... right?”

“Maybe? Hmm. I don’t plan on it, though... You know?”

“I wish you’d stop that.” Shihoru looked downwards, her shoulders trembling. “I’m sorry, I don’t know if I should even be saying this... but it reminds me of Manato. I don’t want you... to die on us.”

“...Yeah.” Haruhiro rubbed his forehead. “Well, I don’t want to die, either. I mean it.”

“Then... take better care of yourself, please.”

“It’s not that I don’t value myself...” Haruhiro pinched the inner corners of his eyes. He needed to press down on them pretty hard. That was how he felt. “I probably just value everyone else more. I mean, without you guys, I couldn’t do anything. Like, the motivation to go on living? I don’t think I could find that. So, if, for instance, I had to choose between you or me, I’d probably choose to help you survive. It’s not that I’d mean to do it. It’d be just instinctual, I think. A snap decision.”

“If only one of us could survive... Haruhiro-kun, I’d rather it be you.”

“It’s a real dilemma, huh,” Haruhiro said.

“What if it was between you and Ranta-kun? Which would you choose?”

“Ranta,” Haruhiro answered without hesitating, then was taken aback by it. “...Whoa. Seriously? This is Ranta we’re talking about. I don’t know that I like this...”

“...I’m glad.”

“Huh? F-For what?”

“That you’re... our leader,” Shihoru said. “Our comrade. ...And friend.”

“...Yeah, you’re making me want to dive into the moat right now.”

Shihoru laughed, so Haruhiro was able to laugh, too. He was glad that Shihoru was his comrade, and his friend. He felt that way from the bottom of his heart.

“So, what was the other thing?” Haruhiro asked.

“The second thing was...” Shihoru closed her eyes, placed her hand over her chest, and took a deep breath. What was she trying to do? Shihoru was trying to do something. He could tell that much, at least.

The air was tense. Haruhiro held his breath and waited.

Shihoru opened her eyes. “Elementals... come...”

“Whoa!” Haruhiro fell back on his rump in surprise.

Right in front of Shihoru’s face, there was a whirling vortex of some sort. It was small. He wouldn’t have called it pea-sized, but it was thumb-sized. It didn’t have anything he’d call a concrete shape or form. There was a whirling vortex there, so he knew something had to be there.

Shihoru reached out with her right hand. She let it sit there in her palm.

“Float,” Shihoru ordered, and it floated. “Fall,” she said, and it descended back into her palm.

Shihoru repeated that raising and lowering process a number of times, with a degree of focus that would’ve been noticeably bizarre, even at a glance.

It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to call her possessed. Shihoru was grinding her teeth. Her eyes were unblinking. Her hair swayed restlessly. As he watched her, Haruhiro got goosebumps.

“...Release,” Shihoru said, forcing the word out.

The thing suddenly let out strange noises and began to change. Like it was being pushed open from inside—it came out. This dark purple thing that was somewhere between a light and a haze appeared. No, it was struggling to appear.

It was trying to be born. That was what it looked like. That was because, depending entirely on how you looked at it, it was star-shaped, or human-shaped even, and it looked like it was kicking and struggling with both its legs and both its arms. But then it suddenly ran out of strength... and disappeared with a poof.

“...No good.” Shihoru slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “I’ve tried it a number of times, but... I just can’t get it to work.”

“To work? What—” Haruhiro rubbed his throat. He’d tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. “...What did you do? Shihoru... Was that magic? No, but there was no chant... You didn’t draw elemental sigils, either...”

“What Gogh-san said... Do you remember it? He said, ‘We set loose an elemental, then activated an alternate power. They won’t teach you this stuff at the guild’...”

“Ohh,” Haruhiro said. “...Vaguely, but yeah.”

“I’ve been thinking about that ever since,” Shihoru said. “In the guild, we learn there are elementals in the world, magical creatures you can’t normally see with your eyes. You could say that what I learned to do there was to tame those elementals, and to use magic by subordinating them to my will.”

“Honestly, I doubt I really understand, but go on.”

“For a while now, there’s one thing I’ve had my doubts about.”

“Err, what’s that?”

“Even in sweltering hot weather, you can call ice elementals and use Kanon ice magic,” said Shihoru. “Even in the middle of the day, there’s no effect on your ability to use Darsh shadow magic.”

“So, elementals are just elementals, and the real—the material world? The heat in it? And, like, light, and shadows, and stuff, too? They don’t interact

directly with that... Is that it? Sort of?"

"But, the thing is, with magic you can freeze things, make them explode, and more," said Shihoru. "So, I wondered if it's not that they don't interact at all... maybe. I was thinking that was strange."

"Uh, sorry? I'm not confident I can keep up with this, but—So, what you just did, it wasn't magic... Is that it?"

"I tried working under the theory that elementals are just elementals," said Shihoru. "Arve, Kanon, Falz, Darsh... I thought maybe those were just something humans came up with on their own, and not the true form of the elementals. That was closer to the sense I had of them, too."

"Magic they won't teach you at the guild, huh..."

"I want to get better at using magic," Shihoru said. "Everyone's always protecting me, so I want to be able to lend them my strength."

"No, you already are strong, you know that?"

"...Not enough, I think. But, I mean, there's no guild in this place, right?"

"Yeah... no," Haruhiro said. "Not a chance."

"If I can't gain new spells... new powers without being taught... I can't change. So... I wanted to do something about it by myself."

You're amazing. It was the one thing Haruhiro could think of to say. Shihoru was truly amazing. Haruhiro was moved.

If Barbara-sensei's not here, I'll have to come up with something new on my own.

Had there been even a single time he had thought that? It had never even crossed his mind.

"But..." Shihoru hung her head, frowning. "There's a thing about it that worries me. It makes me feel uncomfortable, you could say. In a way, this is like... rejecting how I've used magic up until now. I think it might have an effect on the magic I've learned from the guild, too."

"Um, so... You're undecided on whether to keep pushing ahead with it... is

that it?”

“...Right.”

“It’ll be fine,” he assured her.

I mean, not that I’d know, but still...

Haruhiro was no mage. Even if he were, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to tell her anything definite. It might be irresponsible to reassure her so easily. Still, he wanted to nudge her forward, you know? He wanted to support Shihoru, who was working so hard. He thought he ought to, and it wasn’t as if he couldn’t help.

“Listen, if anything goes wrong, I’ll be there to step in and back you up,” said Haruhiro. “We all will be. It’s gonna be fine. I mean, having a goal can help motivate you. I’m sure that probably plays into it, too. I mean, this would be your own original magic, right? I wanna see it. Yeah, I’m sure it would be good for the party, too.”

“...Thanks.”

“No, no, no. I should thank you. I’ve got my energy back now. I don’t know about magic, but from here on, if anything comes up, let’s talk about it, okay? If you’re okay with talking to me, I’ll be all ears.”

“Yeah,” Shihoru said. “I’ll do that.”

“You will? Magic they won’t teach you at the guild, huh? I’ll bet it’s not limited to magic. I’ll do some thinking myself, too.”

“You’re a good leader,” Shihoru said.

“Huh?”

“You are, Haruhiro-kun.” Shihoru gave him an uncharacteristic grin. “You’re the best leader we could ask for... you know that?”

“...Heh heh.” Haruhiro couldn’t help but grin, so he covered the bottom half of his face with one hand. “C-Cut that out, would you? You’re gonna give me the wrong impression.”

“That wouldn’t happen... right? Not with you, Haruhiro-kun.”



“You think? I dunno... I’m trying to keep it from happening. I’m being careful about that, honestly. Like, there are times I get carried away. Because it’s scary.”

“That’s why we’re able to trust you.”

“Are you trying to compliment me to death?” Haruhiro asked. “It feels like it, you know? You’re making me feel ticklish...”

“Sorry.” Shihoru looked to the moat, taking a short breath. “It’s just... I wanted to tell you what I was thinking. I have to convey things as much as I can. I don’t want... to be left with regrets again.”

Haruhiro suddenly found himself unable to speak. He wanted to agree with her, so he nodded.

Side-by-side at the edge of the moat, for a short while, they crouched there together in silence.

It’s kind of mysterious, he thought. This silence isn’t awkward at all. That’s because it’s Shihoru, huh. If I was with Merry, it might not go like this.

That was when it happened.

“Haruhiro-kun... do you like Merry?”

“Huhh...?!” He pitched forward, nearly falling into the moat.

After that, obviously, Haruhiro desperately denied her suspicions. It turned out that Shihoru didn’t have much reason to believe he did, and she seemed to accept it when he told her he didn’t, but Haruhiro was going to have to be careful not to do anything that would invite misunderstandings in the future.

A misunderstanding? he thought. Was it really? I wonder...

12. Kinuko-sama



“I’m dying! It hurts!” Ranta shouted as he used Leap Out to get in front of the enemy. “Clearly our 49th day is cursed!”

The enemy tried to turn towards Ranta. However, with excellent timing, Kuzaku pushed in with his recently-acquired shield in front of him, and prevented it from doing so.

“Grahhh!” Kuzaku shouted.

“Ngh...!” Ranta swung the black blade he had bought from the blacksmith into the enemy’s flank. “Of course, I meant it’s cursed for you, pal!”

While the lion dead one coughed and spewed blood from its terrifying maw, it wrapped its left arm around Ranta. Kuzaku was getting in the way of its right arm, so it couldn’t move quite the way it wanted to. Kuzaku wasn’t only interfering with its movements; he was shouting out and stabbing his sword into its guts, too.

Yume released her drawn bowstring. Her arrow flew. It struck the dead one in the forehead.

Nice one, Haruhiro wanted to congratulate her, but Yume cried out, “Mrrrow!” in consternation. She must have been aiming for the eyes, but missed. Still, she hadn’t been off by far.

Haruhiro kept a level head as he clung to its back, stabbing his short sword into the dead one’s neck. Its thick, stiff mane got in the way. He pulled his sword back, and stabbed again—No. He sensed it. Its body was filled with an abnormal strength.

Haruhiro let go and jumped away. “Get away from it for now!”

“Kay!” Kuzaku shouted.

“Dammit!” Ranta yelled.

Kuzaku and Ranta both immediately followed Haruhiro’s command and pulled back. In that instant, the lion dead one let out a truly heart-chilling roar. It was a loud noise that seemed to grab everyone who heard it by the guts, messing them up inside. Even if they had been prepared, it would have been harsh. It made them want to cover their ears and scream *Please, stop!* In fact, Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Ranta, and Yume all cringed. Even Zodiac-kun, who was just idly floating around nearby, did. Merry did, too, but Shihoru, who was beside her with her mind keenly focused, was the only one who did not.

“Dark!” Shihoru cried.

When Shihoru called that name, the thing appeared as if coming out of a door that had opened up from an unseen world. The long, dark strings twisted into a spiral and took on a certain form. It was like a person. Just about the right size to fit in a human’s palm. Palm-sized darkness. It was an elemental.

After much trial and error, Shihoru had settled on this form. If you asked her about it, Shihoru would say it was still a work in progress, and that he must have a true form, one more appropriate for him.

Regardless, Dark had grown attached to Shihoru. That was how it looked to Haruhiro. After all, Dark appeared next to Shihoru’s face, and sat on her shoulder. That wasn’t all, either.

“Go!”

When Shihoru gave that order, Dark obeyed. He flew off of Shihoru’s shoulder with a mysterious whooshing cry, or maybe just a noise, as he hurtled towards the lion dead one.

Dark struck the lion dead one in the chest. There was no impact. He was sucked into its body. Did that do something? What had Dark caused to happen? That wasn’t absolutely clear. But, anyway, the lion dead one groaned and doubled over like it had taken a solid punch to the solar plexus, then dropped to a knee. Dark was having an effect on it.

Before Haruhiro could shout “Now!” Ranta was already charging in with Leap

Out. He drew a figure-eight with his black blade and—no.

Ranta was drawing an infinity, not an eight.

“Infinite... Black Purgatory Dance!”

First an infinity, then an eight. The eight was followed by another infinity. After the infinity, an eight. He chained them. Chained and chained them.

The lion dead one wasn't wearing any actual armor, but its body was protected with hard, dense fur, impact-absorbing fat, and thick muscles. Thanks to that, slashing attacks were practically ineffective against it. Yet still, Ranta slashed it. Never learning his lesson, he slashed and slashed like crazy. In the end, he stumbled backwards, short of breath.

“What about that...” Kuzaku stabbed the lion dead one in the belly again, right where he himself had stabbed it before, and twisted. “...was supposed to be infinite?!”

“Nguhhhhhhh!” The lion dead one writhed around, spewing blood.

“That's Ranta for you!” Yume fired off one arrow after another.

She was using Rapid Fire. Three shots. The first shot missed, but the second landed a perfect hit on the lion dead one's right eye, and the third shot pinged off of Kuzaku's helmet.

“Whoa!” Kuzaku yelped.

“Meow?! S-Sorry 'bout that!”

“Bwahah!” Ranta quickly shot back at her. “That's just Yume for you!”

“Shut up, stupid Ranta!”

“Ehe... It's true, you're too noisy... Shut up, Ranta. Forever... Ehehe...”

“Zodiac-kun! You're basically telling me to die there, aren't you?!” Ranta screamed.

“Auugh...!” The lion dead one tried to push Kuzaku away.

Kuzaku dug his heels in, standing his ground. He forced his longsword in even deeper, and twisted it. “Rahhh!”

Haruhiro jumped on the lion dead one from behind, stabbing his short sword into its back. He tore through the fur, flesh, and fat layers. His blade passed between its ribs—but it was no good. He didn't reach its organs.

"Haru!" Merry called out to him, so Haruhiro decided to quietly put some distance between himself and the lion dead one. When facing an enemy of this level, a mere thief like Haruhiro was hardly ever going to be able to land a fatal blow. That was the safest assumption. If he could see that line, things would be different, but it wasn't a thing he could see by trying to.

With a roar, the lion dead one tried using both hands and both legs to push Kuzaku away from it. Kuzaku was resisting, but the odds were against him in a test of pure strength.

"Die already!" Ranta whacked the lion dead one hard in the head with his black blade, but he still couldn't cut it.

The lion dead one finally kicked Kuzaku, knocking him off balance.

"Guh!"

The lion dead one immediately turned and ran.

"You think you can get away?!" Ranta shouted, chasing after it. No, he only pretended to. Ranta made it two, three steps and then stopped, clicking his tongue. "We missed our chance to kill it! It's because you're all hopeless, you know that! If we'd had another of me, we could've taken it out!"

"...Yeah, just keep talking." Haruhiro looked around the area, checking that there weren't any other dead ones, then took a deep breath.

"Kehehe... If there were two of Ranta... this world would be a nightmare... Kehe... Kehehehe..." Zodiac-kun cackled.

"Whaddaya mean by that?!" Ranta hollered.

"Exactly what it sounded like," Shihoru muttered.

"Zodiac-kun's so kind." Merry smiled coldly. "If anything, that was a generous assessment."

"You peopleeeeeee. What'd I ever do to youuuuuuuuu?!"

“You’ve been doin’ all sorts of stuff.” Yume puffed up her cheeks and plucked at the string on her bow. “Mrrrow. Was that a close one... You think?”

“Hard to say.” Kuzaku lifted the visor on his helmet, bending his neck. “I thought I could push through, but I couldn’t. It was like we were missing some decisive factor? Maybe?”

“But Shihoru’s magic was effective.” Haruhiro gave Shihoru a thumbs up.

“You think so?” Shihoru’s neck shrunk into her body with embarrassment. “I hope it was.”

“You were great.” Merry patted Shihoru on the back. “Creating magic in your own style. I could stand to learn from your example.”

“...Eh heh,” Shihoru giggled self-consciously.

“Thanks to me!” Ranta puffed up his chest. “It’s because I’m always showing off my freewheeling style! It was my influence! Clearly!”

“Kehe...”

“Wh-What, Zodiac-kun? If you’ve got something to say, then say it. We’re buds. No need to hold back on me now. —Wait, you’re vanishing?! Because of that?! Hold on, Zodiac-kun, come back, okay?! If you leave like that, it’s gonna be awkward for me when I summon you again, you know?!”

The lion dead one was a troublesome enemy that sometimes appeared in the Northwest Quarter of the City of the Dead Ones. Until a little while ago, they would have had no choice but to flee the moment it attacked, but now they could fight it on even footing. They had fought it a number of times, so they were getting used to it. However, factoring in the experience they had gained, it probably was okay to think that Haruhiro and the others were getting stronger.

In fact, their equipment had gotten better, too. Kuzaku had gotten himself a curved, trapezoidal shield—according to the blacksmith of Well Village, it was apparently called Gushtat—and, having gotten his hands on a pair of lightweight, sturdy gauntlets, Ranta had replaced his armor with a lighter, more ominous looking set. He was calling it his Death Armor. What a complete and utter moron.

As for Haruhiro, his cloak, leather armor, gloves, pants, and everything else had all gotten so ratty and tattered that they were beyond repair, so he had bought some nice, dark-colored replacements from the clothing and bag seller in Well Village. For a breastplate and such, he had gotten a matching set of leather pieces made from what, on closer inspection, seemed to be snake leather. He was quite fond of them. He'd had to have a pair of seven-fingered gloves reworked for his five-fingered hands, but he'd gotten so used to them now that they felt strangely familiar to him, and they were easy to use.

It seemed Yume had decided to increase her defense in a way that wouldn't impede her ability to use her bow. She was wearing a number of different protectors here and there. They were probably made of bone and coated with a resin of some sort, but they really were light.

Shihoru's hat and robe had also been badly frayed, so the girls had gone together to buy her something that looked suitable from the clothing and bag shop. They had done that, but it looked like it was a little tight in the chest area. Still, maybe the robe she'd had up until now had just been a little too loose-fitting.

Ranta whispered to Haruhiro and Ranta, quietly so that Shihoru couldn't hear him for a change, "She wasn't just hiding big ones. Those are some serious torpedo tits she's rocking. I mean, man, she's even more stacked than I thought."

Honestly, Haruhiro agreed, but he still felt an urge to kill the guy for saying it.

As a priest, Merry had been hesitant to do it, but she'd disposed of her priest's robe which was badly damaged. She'd looked for a white coat to replace it, but couldn't find one, so she'd settled on a deep blue one instead. It was a good fit for her body type, and she looked good in it. She'd also acquired a staff with a head on it that looked like it would be painful to get hit with, but that'd been loot, not something she had bought.

Incidentally, they had all bought masks or face coverings from the mask shop, making the time they spent hiding out in Well Village somewhat more comfortable. They were also buying their daily necessities as the need arose. There were now far fewer things that they felt were missing in their lives.

Other than that, the most notable thing was Shihoru's new magic. She had given form to the elemental she'd named Dark, which she could now control.

It seemed that the reason Dark resembled a shadow elemental was because Shihoru specialized in Darsh shadow magic. Elementals fed on a mage's magical power in order to take form, and to exert their power. Because of that, the mage and elemental each directly influenced the other. Being a thief, Haruhiro didn't really understand it, but it could be similar to what happened with a dread knight's demon.

Anyway, Shihoru's new magic, Dark, had only just been created and it was still a work in progress, so there was still all sorts of potential there.

Shihoru had chosen the path of Darsh magic, which specialized in support and interference spells, but she'd also picked up Falz magic as well in order to gain some destructive power, and she had dabbled in Kanon magic a little, too. Her path had taken a number of twists and turns. However, going from one thing to another was probably not what Shihoru had really wanted to do. She was an earnest sort, the type that would have wanted to pursue a single thing as far as she could take it.

Could Dark, perhaps, become that one thing for Shihoru? Haruhiro hoped so.

Their 49th day in this world ended, and the 50th began.

When they went into Well Village to wash their faces and get breakfast, Haruhiro and the others encountered him again.

"Oh ho!" Ranta jumped into the air. "It's Unjo-san!"

Wearing a braided hat, this man who was like a walking arsenal with axes, swords, crossbows, and more hanging from his hip and backpack, was sipping at a bowl of bug soup. This was only the second time they had seen him, but he was unmistakable. It was Mr. Unjo.

When Mr. Unjo finished drinking the broth, he picked out the bugs with his fingers and ate them. Then, when the bowl was empty, he said, "Ruo keh," returning it to the giant crab grocer before finally turning to Haruhiro and the others.

“You people, huh. Volunteer soldiers. You still live, do you?”

“Thanks to you!” Ranta rushed over and did a fist pump. “I mean, man, that City of the Dead Ones! When you told us about that place, you really helped us out! Ever since, our quality of life has been on a serious upswing! You’re the best, Unjo-san! Unjo-san for president! President...? Maybe king would be better? Well, whatever. Ehehehehehe. Would you like that, Your Excellency?! No, actually, how about Your Majesty?! You want that?! Is that what it’s gonna be?!”

“Man, you are seriously annoying...” Haruhiro fought off a pounding headache as he pushed Ranta aside and bowed his head in apology. “I’m sorry for our stupid, worthless piece of trash...”

Mr. Unjo grabbed the brim of his braided hat and pulled it down. He didn’t say a word. What did that mean? Was he angry, maybe...?

Ranta gulped audibly, and poked Haruhiro in the side. “Y-You moron. Th-This is your fault! Everything is!”

“Why...?”

“You’re the leader, damn it! That means everything’s your responsibility, you worthless chunk of smegma!”

With a glance back at Haruhiro, who was so exasperated he lacked the will to get properly angry, Mr. Unjo started walking.

Where was he going? To the general store that was beside the grocery store? Well, they called it a general store, but most of what the store had on display was junk. What was more, outside of the rare occasions when the lanky shopkeeper who dressed all in dark grey was outside, it wasn’t open for business.

The owner wasn’t around right now. The door to the building was still closed.

Once before, Ranta had said something stupid about a test of courage, or something like that, and knocked on the door. There had been no response.

The general store was the most mysterious shop in all of Well Village. For a start, Haruhiro and the others had just started calling it a general store on their

own. It might not even be a store at all.

Mr. Unjo did not knock on the general store's door. He suddenly opened it. It was a sliding door. Mr. Unjo silently entered.

—*Wait, huh?* Haruhiro thought, startled. *Is that okay?*

"Wh-What should we do?" Ranta had taken shelter behind Haruhiro at some point.

"...What do you mean, 'what'? For now, just get away from me."

"Hey, man, I'm not clinging to you because I like it. Don't get the wrong idea, moron."

"Hmm." Kuzaku pressed on his neck and twisted it around. "I'm interested, you know. Truth be told."

"Yeah," Yume said idly. "Let's try goin' in."

Well, we're inside Well Village. It's not like we'll get killed, reasoned Haruhiro. *Probably.*

The door to the general store was still open. Haruhiro first tried peeking inside. He was in for a bit of a surprise.

There wasn't a single window, and the walls that were dimly illuminated by a lamp were covered in—Were those stone tablets? Or clay tablets, maybe? Either way, the sight of a great many rectangular tablets, large and small, with symbols and pictures carved into them, was overwhelming for Haruhiro. Were those symbols letters? Some of the pictures were even colored.

Even seated on a chair in the back, the lanky shopkeeper looked long and thin. Mr. Unjo laid that large backpack of his down on the ground. It looked like he was trying to retrieve something from inside it. It turned out to be a stone tablet.

"Wowie..." Yume crouched down at the door. "What's all that? It's amazin'."

Ranta raised the visor on his helmet and looked all around, staring. "Treasure, huh...?"

"Is this all there is?" Shihoru looked around the room, then sighed. "Though,

in a way, it might be a treasure...”

“This might not be a general store,” Merry said quietly. “It could be a museum, maybe?”

“The stuff looks old enough for it to be.” Kuzaku wandered inside. He started reaching out to touch one of the stone tablets, but then pulled his hand back. “Maybe touching them’s a bad idea.”

The lanky shopkeeper accepted the stone tablet from Mr. Unjo, placing it on the desk and holding both his hands over it.

Haruhiro shuddered a bit. He’d seen something a little scary. The lanky shopkeeper’s hands. They had five fingers, but on the palms—If Haruhiro’s own eyes weren’t playing tricks on him, there were eyes there. The lanky shopkeeper was using those eyes to scrutinize the stone tablet.

Mr. Unjo turned back to Haruhiro. “Here, there are no books. No paper books. There are records left, though. On stone, on clay. On tablets. The eyehand sage, Oubu, is a researcher. He collects tablets. If a tablet is of value, he will buy it from you.”

The eyehand sage, Oubu, presumably meant the lanky shopkeeper. When the sage Oubu’s hands moved away from the tablet, the sage fished through the desk drawers and pulled out some black coins. They were big. Not small, or medium-sized. Large coins. Not just one. Two of them.

Two large coins meant 2 rou. Depending on the store they went to, or rather the person, the value of them could range anywhere from 20 to 50 ruma. It was a fortune.

Taking the two coins from the sage Oubu, Mr. Unjo stuffed them unceremoniously into his backpack. “Ruo keh.”

“Avaruu seha,” the sage Oubu responded, his hands returning to the stone tablet on the desk. With those eyehands, he was closely examining the newly-acquired tablet.

“Lumiaris and Skullhell.” Mr. Unjo suddenly mentioned two unexpected names as he pointed to one of the stone tablets. “The battle between gods is depicted.”

“Ohh...!” Ranta rushed over, pressing his face up close to the stone tablet. “He’s serious! This guy on the right, his face looks just like Skullhell’s symbol!”

“Lumiaris is always just represented by the hexagram, never drawn, but—” Merry seemed intrigued too, and squinted at the stone tablet. “The woman on the left, that’s Lumiaris...?”

This stone tablet was oblong and rectangular. On the right-hand side was a man with a skull-like face, and on the left was a long-haired woman. The man held a large scythe in his right hand, a sword in his left, and he had only one leg. The woman was naked, with a large sphere in her right hand and a tiny sphere in her left. There was a rainbow on her back.

The right half of the background was night, and the left half was day. There were many tiny creatures at the bottom. They were each aligned with the man or woman, and they were fighting one another. They were running each other through with swords, there were arrows flying back and forth, and many of the creatures could be seen to have collapsed. There was a bloody battle underway.

“It happened here,” Mr. Unjo said in a low voice. “Lumiaris and Skullhell were here. Here in Darunggar.”

“Darung...gar?” Haruhiro asked as he looked to the other stone and clay tablets.

“That is what those here call this place.”

“The God of Light, Lumiaris, and the Dark God, Skullhell, fought here in Darunggar...” Shihoru said cautiously. “Long ago, the people of Darunggar sided with either Lumiaris or Skullhell, and they fought... Is that it?”

“Who won... I wonder?” Kuzaku rubbed the hexagram carved into his own armor.

“Hey, man.” Ranta snorted. “Look how dark it is here. Obviously my beloved Lord Skullhell won the day, right?”

“But light magic works here, too?” Merry immediately rebutted. “If Lumiaris lost, isn’t it strange that her power still reaches here?”

“You can say that, but it goes for my dark magic, too, you know? Well, both of

them feel like they're less than half as effective as normal, though."

"Well, then." Yume was looking at another stone tablet. "It must've been a tie, don'tcha think?"

"So, now they've both gone to Grimgar?" Haruhiro tilted his head to the side. "...What would you call a group of gods, anyway? A band? No. A crowd? No. A party? No. Maybe a pantheon...?"

"The course of the battle remains unknown." Mr. Unjo shouldered his backpack. "The eyehand sage, Oubu, says that he does not know. He is investigating that. Regardless, Lumiaris and Skullhell left Darunggar. Darunggar is a godless world."

"They left..." Haruhiro tugged the hair on the back of his head a bit. "—Wait, where'd they leave from?"

Shihoru gulped. "There's... a path, somewhere? Without a path from Darunggar to Grimgar, they couldn't have left... right?"

"That means one thing!" Ranta shouted. "We can get home, right?!"

Kuzaku glanced at Mr. Unjo. "If we could get back, wouldn't he have already done so?"

"Oh, yeah." Yume let out a deep breath. "With Konjo-san still bein' here, that's probably right, huh..."

"You mean Unjo-san, okay?" Haruhiro corrected her, then got back on track.

Really, he wasn't all that shocked. He had been thinking, *I wanna go home. It'd be nice if we could*, but lately he had started to feel, *Well, if we can't get back, that's fine, too*.

If they became unable to find any leads on how to get back after one hundred, two hundred days of being here, they would have to start working under the assumption they were going to have to live out their lives here for real. They would put down roots in Darunggar. By starting families, for instance? Of course, that would be something they'd naturally start to consider. It was probably an important thing. Haruhiro couldn't excuse himself from it, saying, *I'm the leader*. If anything, as the leader, he needed to take the

initiative.

There was no guarantee he wouldn't end up confessing.

No, that's not likely, huh? I can't, right? Or rather, what's a confession? What am I gonna confess? To whom? I don't know what I mean.

While Haruhiro was asking those meaningless questions to himself, Mr. Unjo left the sage Oubu's lab, which was not a general store at all. He could have said something first, but this was Mr. Unjo, so it was hard to blame him, Haruhiro supposed.

Haruhiro and the others left the lab, too, and saw Mr. Unjo was heading towards a different building. It was the largest building in Well Village, made from piled stones, with glass windows. In Haruhiro's experience, there was always light leaking out from the glass windows. There had to be someone living there. Or so he'd always assumed, but he had never seen whoever lived there.

Mr. Unjo had entered the building last time, too. Haruhiro remembered that. He hadn't seen anyone else going in or out.

Mr. Unjo opened the door, glancing to Haruhiro and the others. *Follow me*, he seemed to be saying. Having interpreted it that way, Haruhiro and the others followed Mr. Unjo into the building.

Haruhiro got goosebumps. It was a very strange feeling.

Where is this place? wondered Haruhiro.

The world called Darunggar. Well Village. It didn't feel like either of those. This place was different.

Unlike the other buildings in Well Village, this one had a proper floor, and there was a carpet laid out. There were shelves. There was a single table. There were five chairs. It looked like there was another room in the back. On either side of the glass window, there were curtains. There were candlesticks sitting around here and there. Every one of them was lit. Four of the chairs were placed around the table. There was just one in the center of the room.

There, in the middle of it all, *she* was sitting.

She was human. Wearing a red dress. With white socks, black shoes, a red ribbon, blonde hair, and blue eyes. She looked like a young girl with pale skin.

That was what he thought at first. He quickly realized that wasn't the case.

"...A doll?" Haruhiro blinked and took another look.

Why had he thought she was human? She was well-made, but clearly old, and her skin was cracked here and there. Her eyes were left wide open. But her hair seemed to have been combed, and while the colors of her outfit had faded somewhat, she wasn't torn or frayed anywhere.

"Hold on..." Ranta was speechless.

It wasn't just that doll and the furniture. This room was overflowing with many unique and different things. On the shelves, the top of the table, and even the floor. What was more, though it wasn't quite all of them...

This, and that, and this, and that, it's all familiar.

The picture frame-like thing leaning up against the wall. That round thing sitting on the table. The thick, rectangular thing. The thing with two disc-like objects connected with a band-like thing. The thin, rectangular object that looked like it would fit in his hand. The board-like thing with lots of buttons on it. The object with glass on the front, which was a rectangle with rounded corners.

I've seen them. Probably. Most likely.

He knew he must have. And yet, his confidence was starting to waver. It rapidly diminished. He'd seen them before? Really? How could he say that for sure?

He didn't even know. He couldn't recall their names, or when and where he'd seen them. He couldn't remember, but... How could he say he'd seen them before? What evidence did he have?

Still, there were things there he could firmly identify in there. There were some pairs of glasses. One was black-rimmed; one was metal-framed. Another one had tortoise shell rims. The lenses were broken, or lost in some cases, but they were clearly glasses.

The shelves had books on them, too. However, they weren't like the books he'd seen in Grimgar. They were thinner, and many were small. There were also cans, and clear containers. But though they were clear, they didn't seem to be glass.

Mr. Unjo laid his backpack down on the ground and pulled something out from inside it. It was white, a small ball-like object. When Mr. Unjo laid it on the table, there was a hard sound.

The ball didn't roll. It seemed its surface was bumpy.

"Wha... What is that thing?" Kuzaku asked. "I know it... or I feel like I should, but what is it?"

"Who knows?" Mr. Unjo slowly looked around the room. He might have been checking how far the candles had burned down. "I don't. Not me. But they're different, I can tell that much. The things in this room are different."

"...Different." Shihoru shook her head. "I feel the same way. They're different."

Merry pressed a hand against her chest. "Did you gather all of these?"

"No," Mr. Unjo replied immediately. "When I first came, this room was here."

"Meow..." Yume picked up the thin, rectangular object off the table. When she stroked it with her finger, the dust wiped away, and it was awfully smooth. Yume tilted her head to the side and looked at it funny. "...Nwuh?"

"Did the villagers start the collection, then?" Ranta looked at the doll, seemingly creeped out. "Does no one live in this house? Other than that girl?"

Mr. Unjo gestured towards the doll with his chin. "Don't touch Kinuko."

"Kinu...ko... Wait, you mean the doll?"

"Everyone calls her that."

"Hmm," Ranta said. "Well, she doesn't look like a Kinuko to me. More of a Nancy, if anything."

"She doesn't feel like a Nancy," Shihoru disagreed. "Not a chance."

"Well, what does she feel like, huh?! Speak up, torpedo tits!"

“Torp...” Shihoru covered her breasts with her arms. “...M-Maybe an Alice? Something like that...”

“Alice, huh? Hmm.” Ranta crossed his arms. “Either way, Kinuko’s right out.”

“The gods have left Darunggar.” Unjo lifted up his backpack. “She is their replacement. In this village, Kinuko is worshiped. She came from another world... they say.”

“True enough...” Haruhiro nodded. “She doesn’t look like anything from this world. Yeah. Still, that said, if you were to ask me if she was from Grimgar—”

“Not a chance.” Yume was still fiddling with the thin, rectangular object. “That’s true, but Yume, she’s got this mysterious feelin’, y’know. It’s all so nostalgic, somehow. Even though she ain’t got no clue what this thing’s supposed to be, she’s feelin’ like she knows. Weird...”

“Foreign objects are worshiped, too,” said Unjo. “If you find something out there that feels right, bring it here. Offer it to Kinuko.”

“You mean, um...” Ranta was always vulgar and without class. “For free?”

Mr. Unjo just gave a low snort and didn’t answer the question.

Haruhiro bowed his head a bit. “...I’m sorry about him. Seriously.”

“Huh? What’re you apologizing for, Parupirooooo? You a moron, or something? Yeah, you’re a moron, huh.” Ranta was unrepentant. “Well, y’know, I guess it works like that. Even if there’s no money in it, he’s saying Kinuko’s a god. Maybe we can expect some sort of boon? That’d make it worth doing. Yep. Yep. If we find anything, let’s bring it back here.”

“...But still.” Kuzaku was crouched down in front of the picture frame-like object. “Why is all this stuff here? Or is ‘why’ the question to ask? What is it? I can’t say it all that well, but isn’t it weird?”

Haruhiro could understand what Kuzaku wanted to say. He understood, but couldn’t put it into words very well. It was frustrating not being able to put it into words, and he thought it was really weird.

“We’re searching for a way back to our original world.” Shima’s words came back to him.

A way back. To their original world.

Haruhiro's head hurt. In his temples—no, deeper inside—he felt a heavy, yet sharp pain. There was something there. He couldn't help but feel that way. But his hands couldn't reach it. It was inside his head, after all. He couldn't jab a finger inside and fish around. Oh, if only he could!

"Unjo-san," Haruhiro said.

"What?"

"Unjo-san, you—Do you ever think about wanting to return to our original world, or anything like that?"

"Original world." Mr. Unjo parroted the words back at him, then fell silent.

"Wait..." Merry looked at Haruhiro from behind her mask. "By our original world, you don't mean Grimgar?"

"...Huh?" Shihoru covered her mouth. "Not Grimgar, our original..."

Yume looked up to the ceiling. "...Fwhuh?"

"Original—" Kuzaku was deep in thought. "Our original..."

"Hey, hey, hey. What do you mean, original?" Ranta tried to laugh, but stopped. "...What? We came from some other world before we were in Grimgar... Is that it?"

"If we didn't, then where did we come from?" Merry asked, as much to herself as anyone else. "I don't remember anything from before, but—we had to be somewhere, that much is certain. There's no way we were just born looking like this."

"Where did we even come from?" Shihoru's voice was trembling a little. "By where did we come from, I mean... in my memories, I recall—I asked Haruhiro-kun, 'Where is this place?'"

"...Um," the girl behind him timidly asked, "where is this, do you think?"

"Look, asking me isn't going to help," Haruhiro was pretty sure he had answered.

"...Right, of course. Um, d-does anyone... know? Where is this place?"

Shihoru, Haruhiro remembered. *That's right. That was Shihoru. But where were we?*

"We were lookin' at Mr. Moon." Yume clapped her hands together. "He was all red. That sure was surprisin'."

"Ahh," said Braids as she seemed to notice it, too. She blinked repeatedly, then chuckled. "Mr. Moon is red. That's super pretty."

Yume. That had been Yume. He could remember. Right. At that point, they'd noticed the moon. It had been ruby red, somewhere between a crescent and a half moon.

Why's it red? he'd thought. A red moon had seemed weird.

Where had they been?

"...The hill?" Haruhiro murmured.

They'd been atop the hill next to Alterna. There were rows of graves, and Manato and Moguzo were buried there. They were there... and Choco, too.

Choco. Choco...? Kuzaku's comrade. A thief. One of the junior volunteer soldiers. She'd fallen in the battle at Deadhead Watching Keep.

—Was that all? He didn't know. Something was bugging him. Like he'd forgotten something...?

Big eyes. With bags under them. Pouty lips. A girl with a bob cut.

Choco.

Kuzaku's comrade... She'd died. He'd never see her again.

"We were there on the hill." Haruhiro looked to his comrades. "...That's right, isn't it? At the very least, Shihoru, Yume, Ranta—and Manato and Moguzo were there, too. Kikkawa. Renji. Ron. Sassa. Adachi. Chibi-chan, too. They were there. On that hill. We saw the red moon. Kuzaku, Merry, how was it for you?"

"The hill..." Merry mumbled to herself absently. "...I remember it. Only vaguely, though. I think my first memory is probably of the hill next to Alterna."

"Me too, I think." Kuzaku nodded. "It's sort of an... Oh, yeah, I was there. With them. Dunno what we talked about, though..."

“What a coincidence.” Even Mr. Unjo chimed in, smiling slightly. “I, too, remember seeing the red moon on that hill. ‘The moon is red,’ I thought. ‘How creepy’...”

“...Isn’t that weird?” Haruhiro pulled back one of the chairs around the table and sat down in it. “That we appeared at that hill, I mean. I mean... That’s strange. It really is. No matter where we were before we came to Grimgar, if I think about it normally, uh—There was a tunnel-like place. Something like that, which we must have gone through, right? Then we appeared... on the hill.”

“There was a tower.” Mr. Unjo suddenly took off his braided hat. His close-cropped hair had gone half-white. Though the lower half of his face was hidden by his scarf, everything from his eyes up was exposed. He had a pronounced forehead, and looked to be a man in his forties or fifties. Placing his braided hat on the table, Mr. Unjo took a seat, too. “If my memory is correct, it was the ‘Forbidden Tower.’”

“The tower with no entrance or exit...” Shihoru’s entire body was shivering at this point. “I never knew what it was for... I thought it was weird. For all that time...”

“Could it be—” Ranta sat down on the ground. “Maybe we came out of that tower, don’t you think?”

“Even though there’s no entrance or exit?” Merry asked, doubtfully.

“Hmm...” Ranta knocked on his own head. “There it is. That’s the problem. But, you know, it’s weird if no one can go in or out. It’s meaningless. There’s gotta be a hidden door somewhere, right?”

“Hiyomu’d probably know, don’tcha think?” Yume said. “Hiyomu, she led us from the hill to Bri-chan’s place in Alterna, y’know.”

“It was like that for me, too.” Merry nodded.

“Yeah.” Kuzaku raised his hand slightly. “Me, too.”

“For me—” Mr. Unjo pressed his brow. “It was a man, I think. ...‘Call me Saa,’ he told us. Who is this Bri-chan?”

“Let’s see,” Haruhiro answered. “He’s the office chief for Red Moon, the

Alterna Frontier Army's Volunteer Soldier Corps. His name's Britney."

"Britney." Mr. Unjo's eyes went wide. "...Was this a man who acted like a woman? With light blue eyes."

"...You know him?"

"I know him. His real name is Shibutori."

"Shibutori?!" Ranta exclaimed. "Bri-chan's name is Shibutori?!"

"Shibutori was from a younger generation," Mr. Unjo said. "Compared to me. He's the chief of the Volunteer Soldier Corps Office now?"

"Um, Unjo-san," Haruhiro hesitantly asked. "How long has it been since you came to Darunggar again?"

"Five thousand, six hundred and seventy-six times," Mr. Unjo said with a far off look in his eye. "Since I started counting, that is. That is the number of times the dark night has broken, and the pale morning has come."

"...Five thousand six hundred—"

Was the length of one day in Darunggar equal to a day in Grimgar? Was it different? That much wasn't clear, but if they were the same—Mr. Unjo had spent a full fifteen years and two hundred and one days here in Darunggar.

"Before now, have you seen any other, um... humans like us?" Haruhiro ventured.

"None. This is the first time. You people are the first."

"Seriously...?" Even Ranta sounded pained by that. "That's... That's... Seriously, uh, that's gotta have been pretty tough, huh. Seriously..."

"I've gotten used to it." Mr. Unjo lowered his eyes to the table. "...I *was* used to it. I couldn't return, anyway. I had long since given up. Life here is not so bad. A man's home is his castle. The things that seem strange become normal. You learn the language, too. I have acquaintances here. Your language, it is nearly foreign to me. I've forgotten half of it. As we speak, I remember. Like this. But, either way, I cannot return. You people prepare yourselves for that, too. That hill. The forbidden tower. None of it matters. The hidden door. Even if it exists, you cannot find it. You cannot prove it exists. Live here. That is the only option.

Until you die, live. No matter where you are, it's the same. That is all there is for us."

"It's not just us." Shihoru choked the words out. "Lala and Nono... A pair who were far more experienced and skilled than us came to Darunggar, too. Besides, it's not like we came here directly from Grimgar."

"Where?" Mr. Unjo jabbed his right finger into the table. "Where did you people enter Darunggar from?"

It would be hard for Haruhiro to say he remembered clearly. The distance and direction they'd traveled was kind of a blur. Even so, Haruhiro explained in as much detail as he could, but without making it needlessly complex, the sequence of events by which they had traveled from the Dusk Realm to Darunggar, and then how they had reached Well Village.

"Upstream..." Mr. Unjo laughed, as if in amazement. "You people have good luck. It's a miracle you were all right."

From what he told them, the forest north of Well Village was home to the yegyorns—which, according to Mr. Unjo, meant "mist moths"—a species of poisonous moth. Their poison was intensely powerful, and it took only an instant to make most living creatures faint in agony. However, a sort of weasel-like creature called a getaguna was the one exception. Those creatures had resistance to yegyorn poison, and the yegyorns wouldn't even attack them in the first place.

Yegyorns would swarm their prey and knock them unconscious, at which point the getagunas would rush in and devour the innards. The yegyorns drank their prey's blood, then laid their eggs in the flesh. In time, the eggs would hatch. The rotten flesh would provide them sustenance as they grew, until eventually they emerged as moths and took flight.

Yegyorns were small, only the size of the tip of your baby finger. They were fundamentally impossible to avoid in the dark forests of Darunggar, and by the time you noticed them, you'd have already been bitten.

In fact, Mr. Unjo said that the dose of poison from one of them wasn't so big of a deal, but where there was one, you could expect there were hundreds more nearby, so you would be bit many times in quick succession.

There were yegyorns in the river to the north, too. Furthermore, along the river there were tobachi—which apparently meant “nasty,” or “hard to deal with”—a group of creatures that specialized in sneak attacks lurking all over the place, so caution was necessary. There were many types of tobachi, and it was more a collective name for the fierce, carnivorous creatures that lived along the river.

Naturally, tobachi often fell prey to the yegyorns and getagunas.

Other than that, there were ape-faced creatures called gaugai—these were probably what the party called inuzarus—which were spread out over a wide area. They were omnivorous, but their favorite meal was getaguna.

The moth forest, Adunyeg, north of Well Village, was incredibly dangerous, and people with good sense wouldn't go in there.

The way Mr. Unjo told it, if they planned to cross the Adunyeg to return to the Dusk Realm, they had better be prepared to die trying. Whether it took three days, two days, or one day, Mr. Unjo couldn't imagine traveling through the Adunyeg without encountering yegyorns. And if they encountered them, that would be the end. There were times when one or two yegyorns would wander into Well Village, and when that happened there was always a panic, he told them.

“W-Well, aren't you glad we didn't go and find out?” Ranta gulped. “Well, not that returning to the Dusk Realm'd do us any good. That place was crazy dangerous in its own way. Still, I'll bet you Lala and Nono aren't doing so hot, probably. I mean, I can't imagine they're as lucky as I am. They've gotta be dead. They used us as much as they could and then threw us away, though, so I've gotta say they had it coming...”

“Anyway, they haven't come to this village, right?” Kuzaku said.

“Probably not.” Mr. Unjo was starting to sound pretty darn fluent. “Still, that said, there are other villages. Or towns rather than villages.”

Naturally, it would only make sense if there were. It would be strange and unnatural if this was the only village left after the clash between Lumiaris and Skullhell.

But Haruhiro was shocked.

“Whaa—” Haruhiro was at a loss for words. He traded glances with each of his comrades.

“Mrr.” Yume pressed her hands against both her cheeks. “So there’re towns...”

“Wh-Where’re they at?!” Ranta corrected himself. “Wh-Where, pray tell, might we locate them, good sir?!”

“...Pray tell?” Shihoru’s voice was dripping with loathing.

“I wouldn’t mind telling you people.” Mr. Unjo put on his braided hat. “The reason we can’t return to Grimgar. While I do, I can take you to the town of Herbesit, too. That is only if you wish me to, though.”

13. Revelation



Before setting out, Haruhiro and the others heeded Mr. Unjo’s advice, or rather his instructions, and made thorough preparations.

The town of Herbesit was to the west of Well Village, and a three-day trip on foot. Along the way, they would have to camp out in the woods. There were few of the yegyorns he had mentioned in the forest to the west, but there was a colony of gaugais (inuzarus) in that area. There were also a number of different vicious carnivores and omnivores, as well as the durzoi—which apparently meant “old ones,” or something like that—a human-like race that had four arms.

According to Mr. Unjo, the durzoi were proud hunters, primarily working on their own to target large carnivorous beasts called vaguls. If a party stole their prey, they would become vengeful and dangerous enemies, but as long as their interests weren’t being harmed, they stayed largely benign. Still, the party would need to watch out for those vaguls, as well as other beasts including siddas, wepongs, and gaugais. Those beasts each used different tactics, and would be clever about exploiting any openings.

There was one method that would let them avoid most beasts, and that was a bell like the one on the charcoal burner’s wagon.

They were able to buy a beast-repelling bell at the blacksmith’s. It didn’t come cheaply. It cost a full 20 ruma, but it was apparently a necessity for getting through the forest, so it was probably worth that much.

In the western forest, they basically needed to keep ringing the beast-repelling bell at all times. Mr. Unjo naturally had a bell of his own, but he told them that it would be hard to make it through the forest alone. Having comrades would make the journey easier. When he had to lie down to rest,

others could take turns ringing the bell.

Also, while they weren't as much of a threat as yegyorns, the forest was also home to venomous insects and snakes, so it was best not to leave any skin exposed while sleeping.

Haruhiro and the others bought some thick fabric from the clothing and bag shop to make tents. They also made new undergarments out of fabric that was easy on the skin. They procured preserved food and candles at the grocery store. They also bought oil made from some plant.

Haruhiro and the others had been treating Oubu the sage's lab as a general store, but it turned out the real general store of Well Village was the giant crab's grocery store.

With all of that done, the party followed Mr. Unjo and departed from Well Village.

First they followed the road with the wagon tracks to the charcoal burner's place. The path didn't end there. Haruhiro and the others had thought about that once before. If they continued past there, where would they arrive? According to Mr. Unjo, the road eventually came to a three-fork intersection.

Mr. Unjo led the way, with his beast-repelling bell hanging from his backpack, so for now, all Haruhiro and the others had to do was follow him. As long as they had Mr. Unjo's bell, maybe they didn't need to have a bell themselves. That thought crossed their minds, but that would be relying too heavily on a stranger.

The charcoal burner, who looked identical to the blacksmith of Well Village, was doing some sort of work at his charcoal kiln. Mr. Unjo was apparently acquainted with the charcoal burner, too, because they had a pleasant conversation before he ordered Haruhiro and the others to rest here.

"There is no safer place in these woods," Mr. Unjo told them. "There is no man more friendly than him past this point. Once you understand that, rest to your heart's content."

From the way Mr. Unjo spoke, the people of Herbesit might not necessarily be friendly.

Haruhiro was 99% filled with unease, but it was that last 1% of hope that kept him from backing down. Haruhiro and the others had to know. And not just from hearing it, they had to know firsthand. Seeing was believing. There were things they wouldn't be able to understand until they saw and felt them for themselves. It would be wrong to act on information they had only heard from others. If it was a decision that was going to affect their futures, all the more so.

Once they had taken a short nap, Mr. Unjo pushed for them to depart. Everything beyond the charcoal burner's shack was a new and unknown world to Haruhiro and the others. They were tense, but Mr. Unjo was walking quickly, and nothing happened. It looked like the beast-repelling bell was doing great work.

While they were in the forest, they couldn't see the distant ridge. The sky still brightened a little, though, so they could tell night from day.

The party arrived at the three-fork intersection that same day. Mr. Unjo chose the path leading to the southwest. He said if they went northwest, they would reach steep mountains. They could see the outline of the mountains off in the distance.

The road with the wagon tracks hadn't been left by the charcoal burner; it was apparently something that had existed for a very long time. It was the same for the charcoal burning kiln, and there had been another charcoal burner before the current one.

According to the clay and stone tablets, even after Lumiaris and Skullhell had left, the war had raged on in Darunggar for a long time between the forces of the Light Goddess and the forces of the Dark God. In other words, between the forces of light and darkness. With Darunggar firmly divided into two camps, they had been unable to come back together even after their leaders had left.

That tragic conflict was, incredibly, still dragging on unto this day. For instance, the dead ones were descendants of Skullhell's worshipers, and they killed and devoured one another, praying for the eventual destruction of everything. The people gathered in Well Village were descendants of those who had followed Lumiaris, and they handed down tales of the day Lumiaris would return, bringing light to the dark Darunggar. On the other hand, they thought it

was merely as a legend, as was the prediction that the world would end in darkness. Their worship of the Kinuko doll and otherworldly objects might have been a manifestation of those warped feelings.

According to Mr. Unjo, having deciphered the tablets, it seemed that certain races had built kingdoms, and elements of the darkness and light factions had reconciled to form shared living spaces in the past. However, any group larger than a village or city was guaranteed to collapse under internal or external pressures. Whenever a king who'd used his leadership to build a country died, or was killed, the land quickly devolved into civil war, and everything went to ruin.

Darunggar apparently meant something like "the land of despair." This world hadn't always been known by that name, though. Originally, it had been Fanangar (paradise) ruled by Enos (one god). When Enos had split into the conflicting Lumiaris and Skullhell, it had become Jidgar (field of battle). When the world had been abandoned by both gods, the heavens and earth had become enveloped by despair.

They kept following the wagon tracks through the deep forest. There was still no sign of any beasts. They were grateful to the beast-repelling bells for that. At nightfall, Haruhiro sensed someone looking at him. When he informed Mr. Unjo, he was told it was the durzoi.

"In these woods, it happens all the time," Mr. Unjo told them. "Don't try to search for them. You will never find them. If they become hostile, you will be targeted. No good will come of it."

Haruhiro could probably have just done as Mr. Unjo said and not let it bother him. But, honestly, he wondered.

It had gotten late at night, so they pitched tents and slept in shifts while keeping the beast-repelling bells ringing. He didn't feel it when he was inside the tent, but when it was his shift outside as a bell-ringer, he sometimes felt strangely restless.

The monsters made noises sometimes, too. That had to be deliberate. The durzoi hunters were choosing to make noise to see what he'd do. If Haruhiro acted in a hostile manner, an arrow might come flying his way immediately. The

durzoi might be closer than he imagined. He might turn to find them right there, only to have his life snuffed out in the very next moment. He couldn't deny it was a possibility.

Or perhaps they were having fun by intimidating the party and putting them on-guard...

Haruhiro didn't get much in the way of proper sleep, but when morning came, he no longer sensed the durzoi's presence.

They're gone, huh, he thought. No, there's no way to be sure of that. I can't let my guard down. Or am I overthinking this, maybe?

"You keep worrying like that, and it'll make you go bald one of these days, man." Ranta laughed scornfully.

It pissed Haruhiro off, but giving Ranta the time of day would only make things worse, so he just said, "Yeah, yeah..." and let it slide. But then that piece of trash Ranta leaned in close to Haruhiro's ear and whispered, "B-A-L-D, okay?"

If only Ranta could have disappeared instead of the durzoi. Actually, I wish I could trade out Ranta for a durzoi in the party.

While he was thinking that, he found his fear and unease towards the durzoi lightened. Even trash could be useful for something once in a while.

There was an incident later that day, when the sky began to darken. There was something blocking the path up ahead of them. Worse yet, whatever that thing was, it was moving. No, perhaps "writhing" would be the better word to describe it.

They were long thin creatures. There were a large number of them. An incredible number.

At first glance, they looked like... like innards. Intestines, maybe? If he were to give a more reasonable comparison, they were like worms. Intestines that were as thick as his wrist. No, worms. There was a great mass of them, and they were blocking the wagon track road.

"...What're those?" Kuzaku asked in a hoarse voice.

Surprisingly, Mr. Unjo shook his head. "Who knows."

“Eek...” Shihoru let out a little shriek and back away. It was easy to understand why she’d feel that way.

“I-It’s gonna be fine, okay?” Yume looked to Haruhiro. “...Y’tthink it’ll be fine, right?”

Don’t ask me, he wanted to say, but he held it in. “...W-Well, I dunno.”

“Parupiro!” Ranta slapped Haruhiro on the back. “Go! Jump over them! You do that, and we’ll know if it’s safe or not. Do it! You’re the leader, man! Come on!”

“No, don’t be like that.” Merry was scary at times like this. “Why don’t you jump instead? We’d all be in trouble if anything happened to Haru.”

“What, and you don’t care what happens to me?! It’ll be too late for regrets once I’m gone! Did you ever think about that before you speak, huh?! Do you properly understand my greatness, how special I am, my contributions, and my future potential?!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re special all right, Ranta-kun,” Kuzaku said.

“Kuzacky! Good, good, good! I thought you’d understand! You’re not just a beanpole after all! You’ve gotta be, like, a level 2 beanpole or something! No, maybe even level 3?!”

“Not much of a compliment...”

“I’m singing your praises here. Can’t you even tell that, you moron? Honestly, are you all height and no brains? That’s why you’re a beanpole, huh? Ahaha! Makes sense!”

“Hey.” Mr. Unjo suddenly grabbed Ranta by the collar and started dragging him.

“—Whuh?! Wh-What?! What’s going on?! Whoa, Unjo-san?! I mean, Unjo-sama?! What, what?! S-Stop it?! Whoa! That’s, wagh—”

Mr. Unjo was strong. He easily dragged Ranta along with one arm, then threw him into the middle of the mass of giant worms or moving intestines.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo...!” Ranta landed flat on his backside in the middle of the swarm. “Gwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

It happened in an instant. Ranta was engulfed by the giant worms or moving intestines, and the group lost sight of him. If Zodiac-kun were here, what sort of commentary would the demon be giving? No, now wasn't the time to think about that...

Maybe? I guess...?

"R-Ranta...?" Haruhiro called out hesitantly.

"Bwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!!" Ranta leapt out from the center of the giant worms or moving intestines. There were still worms wrapped around his neck, arms, legs, and torso, trying to pull him back in. Ranta struggled. "I'm dying! I'm dying here, save me! I'm gonna die! S-Save meeeeeeeeeee!"

"If we have to..." Kuzaku muttered, reaching out with his long arm to rescue Ranta.

It was the manly thing to do. Haruhiro was impressed. But wasn't it dangerous? Just as Haruhiro had worried, the giant worms or moving intestines attacked Kuzaku as well as Ranta.

"Wah! Oh, crap!" Kuzaku shouted.

"Dark!" Shihoru summoned the elemental named Dark, and had him plunge into the giant worms or moving intestines. That drove off a few, maybe even a few dozens of them, but it was hardly enough.

If it had just been Ranta, Haruhiro could have abandoned him, but Kuzaku was caught up in it now, too, so he had no choice but to save them. In the end, everyone but Mr. Unjo had to help pull the giant worms or moving intestines that had captured Ranta and Kuzaku off of them one by one. They then moved away from that spot for a little while, waiting for the giant worms or moving intestines to finish crossing the wagon track road. By the time morning came, the strange wriggling objects were completely gone.

What were those things, anyway?

Thinking about it wasn't going to yield any answers, though. Making a mental note that things like that could happen, they walked for a quarter of a day, until the forest suddenly ended.

The wagon track road continued on, on a gradual downward slope. There was a town spreading out on the other side of it. While it was half-crumbled, there was still a defensive wall around it. At a glance, it was a kilometer wide... no, more than that. It looked like a kilometer and a half on each side.

It was bright. These were the city lights. Without a doubt, there was hundreds, possibly thousands of people living in this town. They could clearly see a number of figures walking up and down the main streets. It looked like there were a lot of stone buildings. The buildings were one-floor, two-floors, three-floors, and even taller. There were a number of towers rising into the sky.

The wind suddenly blew, and the trees in the forest rustled. Shortly after that, they heard the sound of a bell. It was different from the beast-repelling bells that Mr. Unjo and Haruhiro's party carried. It was a larger, heavier, and somehow sad sound. There was likely a belfry somewhere in town, and its bell was swaying in the wind. One of those towers might be a bell tower.

"This is the town of Herbesit." Mr. Unjo, who was at the head of the group, removed his braided hat. "Don't hide your face in Herbesit. But don't make eye contact with anyone, either. It will be taken as a challenge. If you are provoked, ignore it. The people in that town love to fight. If you don't want conflict, keep your heads down, and keep quiet. If you want to fight to the death, then that's different. Do as you please."

Haruhiro and the others shuddered.

Just how dangerous is this place...?

As it turned out, it was very dangerous. No sooner had they come to the end of the wagon track road and entered the town than a pair of humanoid creatures who were hunched over as far as possible, but still taller than Kuzaku, came over to pick a fight with them.

They couldn't tell what the pair were saying, but it was clear they were making some sort of false accusations. One jumped back and forth in front of Mr. Unjo, making taunting sounds and clapping his hands. The other kept sticking his face up close to Shihoru's, making high-pitched, *hee-haw, hee-haw* sounds.

Shihoru was practically crying. Haruhiro wanted to help, but if he glared at

those creatures and said, *Hey, cut that out*, a fight would have broken out right then and there. Shihoru would need to endure, and the others would have to put up with it.

Eventually, when it seemed the two had left, Yume let out a strange cry. “Yow!” When Haruhiro looked, she was rubbing the back of her head. Someone had thrown a stone at her, and it had hit.

“Yume?! You okay?!” Ranta looked around the area. “Damn it! Who did that?!”

“Stop!” Merry quickly hit Ranta on the shoulder with her head staff. “It’s an obvious provocation. Don’t fall for it so easily.”

“Merry, you sure you’re not trying to provoke me?” Ranta returned. “That hurt pretty bad, just now...”

“Oh, did it?” Merry brushed him off lightly. “Yume. I know it must hurt, but bear with it. I’ll heal you later.”

“Meowwww. Thanks. This li’l thing came flyin’, and then, bam, it was just a surprise. There’s only a little bleedin’. Yume’s gonna be okay.”

“You’re bleeding a little?!” Ranta continued looking downward, clicking his tongue. “Those punks think they can mess with us. I’ll tear ’em limb from limb. Seriously...”

“He never learns...” Kuzaku wore a slight wry smile.

Shihoru laughed coldly. “Of course not. It’s Ranta.”

“So what if it’s me, huh?! Well, Torpedo Tits?! I’ll grope you! No, let me grope you!”

“Man...” Haruhiro started, but decided it would be stupid to engage with him and closed his mouth.

There were frequent provocations by the residents after that, too. They would stalk and insult them, throw things at them, block the road, and that was only the least of it. There were some who would suddenly trip them, and others who would even go as far as tackling them. No matter how they ignored, dodged, and evaded them, these assailants appeared one after another. It was

exhausting on both a physical and emotional level.

Had Mr. Unjo not been there, they would have fled town within a minute of entering it, or gotten into a fight.

Were Haruhiro and the others being picked on for being outsiders? It seemed that was not exactly the case. There was one-on-one, one-on-many, and many-on-many violence breaking out here and there around town, and they even heard what sounded like bloodcurdling death screams occasionally. It was hard to believe, or at least they didn't want to believe it, but people weren't just getting injured, they were getting killed. What was wrong with this town...?

It was in such a state of chaos that melees broke out on the main streets with considerable frequency, and the onlookers gambled on the results.

Mr. Unjo moved away from the main streets, leading Haruhiro and the others down the back streets. These back streets were a little better. On either side of the street, which was somewhat narrow at roughly two meters across, there were people of various races squatting. They said things in pathetic voices, sticking out their hands. If Haruhiro let his guard down, they would pull at his coat. From what he could see, many of them were injured. They were likely beggars. They were gloomy, depressing, and he soon got fed up with them, but it was better than the main streets where everyone was raring for a fight, and there were constant deaths.

Still, though, could they live like this? There were those who were clearly on the verge of death, or not moving at all, and the smell of something rotting hung in the air. It looked like a number of them hadn't been able to survive like this, and were no longer among the living.

"Don't touch anything in this town that you don't need to. Don't let anyone touch you, either." Mr. Unjo avoided the hands of the beggars as he said that. "You wouldn't want to catch something. I can't say deadly diseases are uncommon here."

"Yikes..." Ranta muttered. Even Ranta, who was a plague unto himself, was apparently scared of getting sick.

Naturally, Haruhiro was afraid of disease, too. Merry had learned Purify, a spell for removing poison, and it worked on some diseases, too. *Some* being the

operative word. Ordinary colds, for instance, could not be healed with magic. If they got sick, they would have to rely on what medicine they could procure, and their own stamina and mental fortitude to get them through it. Haruhiro was well aware that his body wasn't especially robust, and that he wasn't strong-willed, either. When it came to disease, prevention was the best medicine.

While they were weaving between the beggars of the back streets, they ran straight into a tower that was not particularly tall at around five meters high. Mr. Unjo used the metal knocker on the door. Not long after, the door swung open.

A woman with almost translucent white skin wearing a brown robe came out. Her combed hair was gray. Was she human? No, she wasn't. She looked close to being human, but her eyes had no whites. It looked like someone had pressed glass balls into her eye sockets. Besides, she had three slits on each cheek, which were opening and closing slightly. They were almost like gills.

"Unjo," the woman said before looking to Haruhiro and the others with her glassy eyes. "Akuaba?"

"Moa worute." Mr. Unjo gestured with his chin, as if to say, *Let us in*. The woman let not just Mr. Unjo, but Haruhiro and the rest, into the tower.

The ceiling was high. Was it open all the way up to the roof? The walls were almost entirely bookshelves. The shelves carried clay and stone tablets, arms and armor, some type of equipment, items that looked out of place, potted plants, and more. There were lamps left out here and there, as well as ladders and stools.

"This is Rubicia," Mr. Unjo introduced her.

The woman pressed her hands together in front of her chest and bowed to them. That might be how they greeted people here.

"H-Hello." Haruhiro tried imitating Rubicia. "I'm Haruhiro."

"I'm Ranta." Ranta crossed his arms arrogantly. "They call me Ranta-sama!"

"Kuzaku." Kuzaku bowed his head slightly.

"Yoo-may!" Yume said in a loud voice, clearly enunciating, and then smiled.

“Ehehe.”

“...I’m Shihoru.” Shihoru imitated Rubicia like Haruhiro had.

“I’m Merry.” Merry gave a proper bow. “Nice to meet you, Rubicia-san.”

Rubicia nodded slowly, exchanging a few words with Mr. Unjo before descending the stairs by the wall. There was apparently a basement room.

“It’s safe here.” Mr. Unjo laid his pack down on the floor. “If you want to rest, rest. Rubicia will bring water soon. The water is not infected, or contaminated. Don’t worry.”

“Righto!” Ranta sat down immediately. “Come on, if you’ve got yourself a nice safe house like this, say so sooner, Unjo-saaaan, sheesh. By the way, what’s up with Rubicia-san? Is she your *y’know*? Nah, no way...”

“Yes,” Mr. Unjo responded. “Rubicia is my wife.”

Haruhiro couldn’t help but whisper, “Wow...”

14. Dependence



Love was deep.

Maybe.

Well, not that the immature Haruhiro would really understand.

Birth, upbringing, race, none of that had anything to do with it... he supposed? Though it was questionable whether Mr. Unjo and Rubicia were really a loving husband and wife. Mr. Unjo may have simply gotten lonely, being a stranger in a strange land, and sought comfort with a woman he just happened to meet. The woman might only have been indulging him out of a sense of pity or something, too. Haruhiro wouldn't know, but that sort of thing could happen... right? If it did, was that also a form of love? Could he call it that? Maybe? Hmm? He wondered...

The fact that Mr. Unjo and Rubicia didn't act particularly close made something feel off. Was it because Haruhiro and the others were there? Because they were embarrassed? Did they flirt when no one else was around? Or was this just how things were in Darunggar? It was hard to imagine a couple carrying on with what Haruhiro thought of as married life here in Herbesit. Maybe just the fact that they weren't killing each other already meant they were in a pretty good relationship? But Rubicia looked like an intellectual and quiet person—or something so close to a person that, even though she wasn't, he wanted to think of her as one—so she didn't fit in Herbesit to begin with. Or were there some peaceful, pacifist types living quietly here in this town, too?

With Rubicia's tower as their base of operations, they learned a number of things as Mr. Unjo showed them around the town over the next day or two.

In the vast majority of Herbesit, the provocations, violence, and robbery went on without end. Even seemingly empty streets were sometimes the territory of

gangs of robbers, so it was important to remain cautious. The bell tower in the center of town was controlled by a faction called Garafan—which apparently meant “sharp claw”—and that area was especially dangerous. Mr. Unjo said that even he never approached the bell tower.

In the town of Herbesit there were also the Jagma (great storm), and the Skullhellgs (the children of Skullhell), two other gang-like organizations, and, naturally, there was a violent struggle between them. Painting in the broadest strokes, Central Herbesit was Garafan’s territory, Western Herbesit was Jagma’s, and Eastern Herbesit was the Skullhellgs’. If they picked a fight with any of these three groups, they were in for trouble.

However, in the Old Town of Herbesit, there were underground aqueducts, though they hardly worked anymore, as well as graveyards. The ones who ruled the underground here, the Zeran (the scholars), were an exceptional group who didn’t favor violence. That said, they weren’t against using force to keep the fighting under control, so if anyone started a quarrel underground, punishment from the Zeran would be waiting for them. They knew everything about the complicated underground, and had a sizable number of fighters, so the Zeran were by no means weak. In fact, it would be fair to say that, underground, they were incredibly strong. Not even Garafan, Jagma, and the Skullhellgs, the three big gangs of Herbesit, would try to encroach on the underground.

Now, that being the case, you might think Herbesit’s underground was a paradise, and the weak all ought to go down there to live, but there were reasons that they couldn’t. The Zeran weren’t so narrow-minded as to refuse guests, but they were elitists of a sort, and wouldn’t allow outsiders to settle in the underground. Furthermore, there were sealed districts underground that only the Zeran could enter. And in order to become one of the Zeran, one had to understand their doctrines and undergo training.

Incidentally, Rubicia was a former Zeran, and she had lived underground before, but had moved to the surface for certain reasons. While she still had connections in the underground, she was treated essentially the same as an outsider would be.

So, Haruhiro and the others tried visiting the underground. There was a market there, and they could shop with black coins. With blacksmiths, grocers,

clothing stores, and more, there was a greater variety of stores, and better selection in each, than had been available in Well Village. However, the prices were double to triple what they were in Well Village, making things pretty expensive. There was also the difference that everyone worked with base 10.

Also, even in their time there, the party got a sense of how the Zeran looked down on outsiders. Or rather, according to Mr. Unjo, when outsiders shopped in the underground market, they were charged double what the Zeran would pay. Outsiders could complain, *That's not fair*, but they'd just be told, *If you don't like it, get out, and never come back*, and that would be the end of it. There were a number of marketplaces on the surface, too, but the three major gangs were involved in all of them, and that didn't create an environment where they could take their time choosing items at their leisure. They wanted to avoid trouble, so they had no choice but to use the underground market.

Furthermore, in the basement of Rubicia's tower, there was a furnace with a smokestack reaching up to the roof, a cooking area, an incredibly deep well, and a drainage pipe leading to a sewer; all the things they would need to live. In addition, though they hadn't noticed this at first, there were two small mezzanine floors, and Mr. Unjo's and Rubicia's bedrooms were on them.

They were married, but they slept in separate rooms...? Even if Haruhiro had wanted to ask about that, he couldn't. They were already imposing on the two of them in their love nest. It would be wrong to pry needlessly on top of that.

On the third day, when they had learned a little about Herbesit and were starting to feel a little more at ease, Mr. Unjo said they would be leaving town.

"I'll show you people the exit. The entrance to the exit, to be precise. I came to Darunggar through there. My comrades all died. I was the only survivor. I no longer have any intention of returning home. There is a path back. There is a way, but I value my life too much to take it. To live. I've learned that that is the one thing I desire."

Before they set out, Rubicia held Mr. Unjo's right hand in both of her hands, pressing it against her cheek for a short while. It was a silent bit of contact, as if it were some sort of ritual.

Mr. Unjo had said he had no intention of returning home. Was Rubicia the

reason for that, perhaps? In meeting her, Mr. Unjo may have found a reason to go on living here.

When they exited Rubicia's tower and left the town of Herbesit, they headed west, in the opposite direction of the ridge where the flame that was not the sun rose each day.

It was hilly to the west of Herbesit, and there were a number of farms, large and small, surrounded by fences. At the farms there were these creatures with rather tiny, child-like bodies turning over the dirt or pulling up these dark gray stalks that looked like weeds. There were a number of times when collared gaugais (inuzarus) on the other side of the fences barked at them.

"Never go inside the fences," Mr. Unjo strictly ordered them. "It will cause trouble."

He needn't have told them that, though, as they had no intention of going inside them. It wasn't just the tiny laborers who looked like slaves and the gaugais. The farms had lions that stood upright, and muscular humanoids with bull-like heads, too. They were armed. They kept a close eye on the laborers' work, and also ensured that no intruders entered their farms. If they trespassed, even if the guards didn't spot the party directly, the gaugais would bark like crazy and alert them.

Once they were past the farms, there were white things covering the gently rising and falling land. They didn't even need to pick them up to know what they were. They were bones.

The Field of Bones, Zetesidona. According to Mr. Unjo, it was an old battlefield where the forces of Lumiaris and Skullhell had once waged an intense battle, and some great power had caused the death of tens of thousands. The dead had rotted, their possessions had been stolen, and now only bones remained. He said that even those bones were ground up and spread across the farmers' fields, used effectively as fertilizer. Zetesidona had such a great pile of bones that, even with that, they still hadn't run out.

When they stepped on a place where the bones were piled deep, there was a risk of them falling through and getting buried. Looking closely, there were spots where dirt peeked through the bones. Those spots were safe.

They had to watch their footing while crossing the Field of Bones. But if they kept their eyes constantly down, that would be dangerous, too.

There were birds called skards here. These carrion birds looked like large crows, but they couldn't fly much. Their bodies were too heavy. Their leg strength had developed to make up for that, and it was a terrifying sight to see a skard take aim from afar and then charge in a straight line to tackle its target.

If Haruhiro and the party were sent flying by one of those, and landed in the deep bones, that would be the worst. That was apparently how the skards hunted. They dropped their prey into the deep bone piles so that they couldn't move, then pecked them from above. They were ferocious birds of prey.

By the time they reached the reddish-brown river, the Dendoro, it was already night. The Dendoro was not a large river, with the opposite bank being only ten meters away, but its current was swift, and it was by no means shallow. They couldn't walk or swim across it. There was apparently a bridge upstream, but it was far away, so they decided to make camp by the riverside.

When the fire on the ridge set, the carrion birds of the Field of Bones cawed ominously. They could hear them all the way at the riverside, and that made it hard to sleep.

When the skards stopped cawing, the ridge in the distance began to burn. Haruhiro never did get a wink of sleep, but that was nothing new. It was no big deal to him.

They walked along the river, and the bridge came into sight after about a quarter of a day. Haruhiro had a bad feeling about this. When they got closer, the state of the bridge became apparent. The bridge's piers were all still there, as were the girders, but the planks were gone, making it not much better than a log bridge. Haruhiro the thief might have been fine, but it would be a bit cruel to expect the heavily-armored Kuzaku or Shihoru the mage to make the crossing like that. However, Mr. Unjo said, "This is the only bridge."

It's either go on or go back, huh, thought Haruhiro.

It took Shihoru a long time, and there were a number of times when it looked like Kuzaku was going to fall in the river, but they made it across somehow. Mr. Unjo, of course, and the rest of their comrades including Haruhiro, made it

without trouble.

There were ruins on the other side of the bridge. Or Haruhiro called them ruins, but they weren't as intact as the City of the Dead Ones had been. It might have been better to refer to them as the ruins of ruins. However, these ruins of ruins covered a vast stretch of land.

"There was a city called Alluja here," Mr. Unjo explained. "If you search, you'll occasionally find tablets."

"Huh?!" Ranta jumped, then pointed off into the distance. "H-H-H-H-H-Hey, there, there's something over there?!"

"Probably just a pillar or something..." Haruhiro put his hand on the hilt of his short sword just to be safe and squinted at it. In the end, whatever Ranta had pointed at didn't move. It did look person-shaped, but he'd give good odds that it was just the wreckage of a building. —*No...?*

Haruhiro lowered his hips and drew his short sword. "It just moved, maybe? That thing, just now..."

"See!" Ranta held his black blade at the ready, hiding behind Mr. Unjo. "T-Take it out, Unjo-san! I'll back you up! Totally!"

"Yeah, I'm sure you totally will..." Kuzaku got his longsword and shield ready so that he could use them at any moment, then moved up. "There's something, right? Something here."

"Logoks," Mr. Unjo said. "Tree people, they're called." He drew the ax hanging from his hip.

The thing that had looked like the wreckage of a building was walking towards them with swaying steps. Gradually picking up speed. It was coming. Running towards them. The logok. A tree person. It certainly looked like a tree. It had a stump-like torso with leg-like and arm-like branches—no, maybe branch-like arms and legs? Anyway, its movements were awkward, but it wasn't slow.

Kuzaku was ready to meet it head-on, but Mr. Unjo threw his ax. The ax spun through the air, then chopped off one of the logok's legs. The logok lost its balance and tripped.

“Logoks don’t die,” Mr. Unjo calmly explained. “Smash it, and keep it from moving.”

“Roger Wilco!” Ranta sprang at the logok and chopped it up with his black blade. “Ohohohoho! Easy peasy! Gahahahahahaha!”

“Listen, man...” Haruhiro was so disgusted with Ranta that it felt horrible.

“Meow!” Yume let out a strange cry. “There’re still more!”

Haruhiro had figured as much. *Well, no, not actually, but it isn’t strange that there are more. Looking around, I see other humanoid figures have popped up. Popped up? Maybe that’s not the right word. Anyway, they’re probably logoks. Five, six of them. More maybe.*

“They’re not strong,” Mr. Unjo said as he drew another weapon from his pack. “However, they’re numerous, and troublesome.”

“I’ll watch Shihoru!” Merry held her head staff and stood with Shihoru behind her.

Shihoru nodded, as if to say, *I have Merry here, so don’t worry about me.*

They’re numerous and troublesome, Haruhiro thought, remembering what Mr. Unjo had said. It was true, there were a lot of them. To get into rough numbers, by the time they were able to take a break, they had dismantled forty of the things. Fifty, possibly.

Ranta was wheezing, exhausted, and down on all-fours. “A-Are are we gonna h-have to fight these things f-forever...?”

“No. I’ll use this.” Mr. Unjo picked up a dried branch that looked like it had once been a logok’s arm or leg. When he lit it aflame, a white smoke rose up from it and let off a bittersweet smell. It wasn’t intolerable, but it was far from pleasant.

“...Um, does the stench drive off logoks?” Haruhiro asked, trying not to breathe through his nose.

“Yup.” Mr. Unjo looked around. “Just to be safe, take as much as we can.”

“Yuck,” Ranta complained, kicking around pieces of logok. “This stuff stinks. It smells nasty. —Bwuh?!” Mr. Unjo had kicked him in the butt. “I-I’m sorry! I-I-It

smells lovely, right?! It's a sweet smell, yeah?! Okay, time to pick up as much as I can!"

Well, Haruhiro didn't think Mr. Unjo would kick any of them other than Ranta, but he didn't want logoks swarming them everywhere they went, either, so they all worked hard to gather up pieces of logok. How long was it after they started walking again that it happened?

Haruhiro turned back. Had he imagined it? He faced forward again, and walked.

...Huh? No, there was something strange, after all.

Haruhiro raised his hand, having everyone stop. "Um, Unjo-san?"

"What?"

"We're not being followed... right?"

"It's possible," Mr. Unjo said like it was nothing. "The smell of logok repels logoks. However, in exchange, it draws in nivles."

"Nipples?" Yume tilted her head to the side. "What're those?"

Mr. Unjo pulled his braided hat down. "...It's *nivles*."

"You moron." Ranta pointed at his own chest. "If it were nipples, you've got a pair. Why would nipples come up here? Are you nipple-obsessed or something, Yume?"

"...So, what is a nivle?" Shihoru ignored Ranta and asked.

"Lizards," Mr. Unjo responded immediately. "About four meters long."

"Four!" Kuzaku let out a short, strange laugh. "...K-Kinda big, huh?"

"It's certainly..." Merry looked around. "...not small, no."

Mr. Unjo drew the ax at his hip. "They're less like lizards, and more like small dragons."

"Oh, man..." Haruhiro slouched forward. His stomach hurt. "Personally, I don't want to meet any dragons... Not here... No, not anywhere..."

"Y-Y-Yeah, w-w-well, I say I w-w-wanna meet 'em!" Ranta declared.

“You’re sayin’ that, Ranta, but your voice is shakin’.”

“Y-Y-Y-Yume! Why’re you perfectly calm?! It’s a dragon, dammit! You know, a dragon?!”

“Y’tthink they’re cute, these drangos?”

“Not drangos, dragons, you dolt!”

“Yume’s not a dolt!”

“H-H-H-H-H-Here it comes...!” Haruhiro exhaled strongly.

The creature was around five meters to the rear. It had peeked out from around the corner of a ruined wall. It stood less than a meter tall, but it was big for a four-legged animal. Really big. It was a deep green lizard—or more like a crocodile? No, a dragon? It had a fleshy crest on top of its head.

“Do we... run?” Haruhiro hesitantly asked Unjo for advice.

“They’re persistent,” he said. “It’ll chase us for days. We have to take it out. It’s poisonous. If you’re bitten, it will be serious. Be careful.”

“Yes, sir...” Haruhiro responded like a kid without meaning to.

That’s no good. I need to keep it together. I’ve probably been loosening up because Mr. Unjo is with us. I’m the leader here. The leader, Haruhiro told himself. When there’s a reliable person beside me, I depend on them. I’m a weak person. It happens every time, but I still don’t like it. Yeah. I’m weak. I really am hopelessly weak, so I need to at least try to keep it together.

The nivre steadily walked towards them. Its footsteps were practically silent. It was a wonder he had noticed it before. If he hadn’t, it might have ambushed them eventually. Even if they had run their fastest and thought they’d managed to shake it, it might still be sneaking up behind them.

Mr. Unjo was right. They had to settle this here.

“Kuzaku, I’m counting on you,” Haruhiro said. “Take the head. Yume and Ranta, the sides. Merry, stay with Shihoru. Shihoru, support us with Dark. Use whatever timing works best for you. Unjo-san, if it comes down to it, please help.”

“Very well,” Mr. Unjo responded, his voice sounding just a little bit kind.

Haruhiro probably had some pretty sleepy eyes right now.

“...Okay,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

15. Because He Has a Reason



Alluja had once been a massive city. There were even theories that said it had been prosperous before the conflict between Lumiaris and Skullhell began.

It took a whole day to cross the ruins of Great Alluja. During that time, they took a number of breaks, and those who could manage to nap did so, but even if they could set aside their fear of logoks, they'd be afraid of nivles.

It turned out that nivles mainly fed on logoks, but humans were much more appetizing to them. If they saw, heard, or otherwise detected a human, they really would chase them to the ends of the world. Not only that, they didn't just blindly attack; they were also nasty about finding good openings to do so.

Mr. Unjo said they were four meters long, but that varied by individual specimen, and they ranged anywhere from three meters long to close to five meters for the largest. The males were crested, while the females weren't. The larger and more showy their crest, the more violent a male was, but those ones would attack them head-on with confidence, making them easier to handle. Surprisingly, it was the females that were more subdued in their appearance that were dangerous. The females were calculating, and fast, too. They made fearsome opponents.

Haruhiro and the others took down seven nivles as they crossed the ruined city. Four male, three female. Every fight had been to the death. They were just fortunate that nivles didn't hunt in groups. If they'd had to face more than one of those things at the same time, they wouldn't have stood a chance.

Nivle hides apparently sold for a good price, but they were also bulky, so it didn't feel worth lugging them along. They tried cooking and eating their meat, and it wasn't disgusting or anything.

When they came to the end of the ruins, there was a downhill slope. The

incline wasn't particularly steep, but it went down a long way. It was like it was going all the way into the depths of the earth. It went down so far that, even during the day, it got so dark that they couldn't see what was in front of them.

If they hadn't had Mr. Unjo there to guide them, they would never have gone down. It was kind of scary, after all.

"Um, what's past here...?" Haruhiro worked up the courage to ask.

"Orcs," Mr. Unjo answered, as indifferent as he always was.

"Walk?" Yume repeated.

No, Yume, thought Haruhiro, that's not it. What are you walking for? Well, we are walking, though.

"Wait..." Merry checked with him, "By orcs, do you mean...?"

"They're similar to them, at least," Mr. Unjo said as he descended the slope one step at a time. "Besides, they're called orcs here in Darunggar, too."

"Whoa!" Ranta shuddered. "Well, damn. Now I've got goosebumps. It's like, you know. In our world, orcs are the enemy, but here, I almost feel an affinity with them... Well, no, not quite, but still..."

Mr. Unjo snorted. "They're the enemy here, too."

"Those orcs," Shihoru said in a voice as quiet as the buzzing of a mosquito, "could they have come from Grimgar...?"

"The entrance to the exit..." Kuzaku whispered to himself.

Mr. Unjo simply said, "Who knows?" Then, after a long silence, as if he were recalling it for the first time in a long time, he said, "This might have been their homeland."

The hill was rocky, but it was covered in fine pebbles that were like sand. Because of that, they had to be careful or their feet would slip.

The slope was apparently nivre-free. That was probably because the logoks they mainly preyed upon lived in Alluja.

Here and there, there were holes of about a meter in diameter. Mr. Unjo avoided them. When asked why, he said, "Because there are gujis."

From what he told them, a guji was a creature somewhere between a monkey and a bear, and they would fight to the death to defend their dens. If you poked at their den even a little, sometimes more than ten gujis would come out, and it would turn into a huge problem. If you could catch them, gujis were edible, but they were muscly and their meat was unusually tough, even cooked. If you stewed it until it softened, the broth was supposed to be good. Not that they were going to catch one, or stew it.

Eventually, they started to see red lights here and there. The temperature was rising, too. It was a little hot. There was steam rising all over. The word “crater” flashed through Haruhiro’s mind. Could the lights be lava... maybe?

They passed by one of them soon enough. It was bubbling and steaming. No joke, it looked like it really was lava. If they slipped and fell in, they’d get worse than just burned.

They came across a river, too. It wasn’t even knee-deep, and the water was more than just lukewarm—it was kind of hot. Not too hot, though.

“A hot spring?” Merry questioned.

“Mixed bathing!” Ranta exclaimed.

“Not a chance!” Yume whacked Ranta in the back of the head.

“It’s potable, too,” Mr. Unjo said, gesturing to the hot spring river with his chin. “The taste is strange, but it won’t cause indigestion. We’ll rest here.”

The party didn’t go in for mixed bathing, obviously, but they dug a bathing hole in the side of the river, and the guys and girls took turns washing themselves. Mr. Unjo volunteered to act as a lookout, thankfully.

“I dunno what to say...” Kuzaku said once he had sunk in up to his shoulders. “Doesn’t it just make you feel glad to be alive? Is it just me? Like, I could die satisfied right now. Nah, I don’t want to die, though. Feels good...”

“I know how you feel...” Haruhiro scooped up some of the water in his hands, gently washing his face. “This is nice. I mean, damn, this is the best...”

“Whaddaya mean?” Ranta crossed his arms. “I’m disappointed in the two of you! We totally coulda gotten them to get in with us. If you two had just agreed

with me, they'd have been like, 'Well, this time, I guess we'll have to.' Are you morons? Just how shitty do you guys have to be?"

"...I'm kind of curious on what grounds you think there was any chance they'd have gone along with it?" Haruhiro asked.

"Huh? It's all about feelings, man, feelings. They say when you're traveling, you should leave your sense of shame behind, right? If everyone did that, they'd be down for some mixed bathing, don't you think? I mean, the girls aren't stupid."

"Well, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry aren't stupid like you, so they wouldn't think that."

"Oh, shut up! I wanted to do some mixed bathing! I wanna bathe with some girls! I wannaaaaa!"

"You're like some kind of mixed bathing fiend, huh?" Kuzaku sighed deeply. "Man, this feels good..."

Maybe because he'd had a good bath, or due to lack of sleep, Haruhiro slept well. Yume had to shake him awake, and he felt sorry about that.

Mr. Unjo told them that he had once survived using this Hot Spring River as his watering hole. That was apparently when he had eaten guji meat, too.

Once they crossed the Hot Spring River and continued onward, the ground leveled out. The moment they noticed, though, a steep cliff rose up in their way. It wasn't a dead end. There were fissures in the cliff.

The fissures snaked inwards, narrowing and broadening. They couldn't see even a few meters ahead, which made them feel incredibly uneasy. Had Mr. Unjo found this path and come through on his own?

If Haruhiro had found himself in Mr. Unjo's position... he couldn't have done it. He didn't even need to think about it. It would've been impossible for him. He didn't have the ability, or the attachment to life.

When he was doing something for his comrades, Haruhiro could try pretty hard. But when it came to himself, he was useless. He couldn't bear the pain, the suffering, or even the lack of hope. For better or for worse, that was just

who Haruhiro was as a person.

How about his comrades? Kuzaku, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry were probably all pretty close to Haruhiro in that regard. It might be that the only one who could have held in there for his own sake was Ranta.

This was probably a strength of the party, and also a weakness. They could all get along, with one exception, and they could cooperate, but looking at it more harshly, they were all highly codependent, and fragile when it came down to it. If even one of them died, they'd likely lose the will to put up a proper fight. It wasn't a situation he wanted to think about, but it was something he had to think about as leader. This was enemy territory, after all.

"Whoaaaaaa..." Ranta breathed.

He sounded like an idiot. But, well, it was an incredible view, you could say.

At the end of the twisted fissure path, a majestic view appeared before them.

They could see hundreds, maybe thousands, of streams of lava rising and falling as they spread out. There were hills. There were mountains. There were boulders. There were buildings, big and small.

Yes.

Most were carved out of boulders, but they were most certainly buildings. They were reinforced and decorated with iron struts, and there was a building that looked like some sort of shrine or temple, too. There were towers. Though they weren't high-rises, there were some medium-sized buildings here, too.

Sandwiched between two narrow flows of lava, that road—yes, it really was a road—the road, the city streets, stretched from one to the other. There were large buildings facing onto the big streets, and rows of tiny little buildings facing onto the small ones.

The sky was already dark. It was night. But thanks to the lava, this was a town with no night.

A town.

That was a town. Or perhaps a city.

"...No way." Kuzaku's voice cracked as he spoke.

“Is—” Haruhiro couldn’t find the words to speak.

“Is that...” Shihoru asked in a vanishingly small voice. “The orcs’ town? All of it...?”

“Whew,” said Yume. “Sure is a big city, huh?”

Yume was taking it easy. Too easy, if anything.

“Is that it?” Merry asked the question Haruhiro had wanted to. “The entrance to the exit?”

“Yes.” For some reason, there was a slight laughter in Mr. Unjo’s voice. “That is the entrance to the exit. I came through that city, Waluandin.”

“They’re our enemies, yeah?” Kuzaku rubbed his lower back. “The orcs...”

“Clearly,” Mr. Unjo declared. “The orcs won’t let anyone but their fellow orcs go. Livestock are a separate matter, however.”

“Y-Y’t think we should let them raise us? Might be easier—” Ranta looked to the others, then cleared his throat. “I-I’m kidding, obviously. There’s no way I’d be serious, y-you morons.”

“Might not be a bad move.” Mr. Unjo stroked his beard. “More realistic than running through there, at least.”

“I-I-I-I know, right? Right? Heheheheheheheheh...”

“He’s being sarcastic...” Haruhiro sighed. “Figure that much out on your own.”

“Shut up! I knew that! I was just playing stupid, you moron!” Ranta hollered.

“So...” Yume puffed up her cheeks and pointed towards the city of Waluandin. “What now? We’re already here, y’know. It’d be nice to try gettin’ closer.”

“Yume-san’s got guts...” Kuzaku looked seriously put off by what she was suggesting.

“Well, only if it’s not dangerous, y’know?” Yume said. “If it’d be dangerous, Yume thinks we’d be better off leavin’, too.”

“It’d obviously be dangerous!” Ranta stomped his feet. “You should know that much!”

“If it’s just a li’l bit dangerous, it might be might be fine!”

“It might not be...” Shihoru looked ready to collapse at any moment.

“Wh-Where...” Haruhiro pressed on his throat. He had to man up. He might be in shock, but he’d been prepared for this to a degree. Though, only to a degree. “Where did you come through? Unjo-san. I mean, like, what area?”

“I don’t remember. I was desperate.” Mr. Unjo slowly laid down his backpack, crouching next to it. “The one thing I do know for certain is that two of my comrades died in Waluandin. Iehata and Akina. They were killed by orcs, and I escaped. Alone.”

From what Mr. Unjo tersely told them after that, his party had encountered difficulties on the border of the former kingdoms of Nananka and Ishmal.

The territory of the former Kingdom of Nananka was overrun with orcs, and the former Kingdom of Ishmal was undead territory. Mr. Unjo and his comrades, back when he was still young and full of vigor, had daringly stormed into the enemy’s main base and fought evenly with powerful undead. However, one day, they’d been caught by a surprise attack, and one of their comrades, the thief Katsumi, died.

While they’d been running around in enemy territory, they’d wandered into a foggy area and gotten lost. They’d passed through a cave and come out into a dark mountainous area with rivers of lava, where they’d thought they were safe. Although, when they’d seen the lizards leisurely swimming in those rivers, they had sensed something was off.

Fortunately, those lizards, which they’d decided should be called salamanders, hadn’t attacked them, but then a terrifying dragon had eaten the salamanders. Mr. Unjo’s party had been chased by that dark red dragon, the fire dragon.

Two of Mr. Unjo’s comrades, the paladin Ukita and the mage Matsuro, had apparently been eaten by that fire dragon. While they were being devoured, the hunter Unjo, the warrior Iehata, and the priest Akina had fled as fast as they could.

And then they’d reached Waluandin. What had awaited them there was

thousands, tens of thousands of orcs.

Haruhiro tried sorting out his thoughts.

There were currently two ways out of Darunggar.

The first option was to take the route they'd come through. They would return to Well Village, then travel through the good old nest of gremlins to reach the Dusk Realm. However, the northern forest was infested with the mist moths called yegyorns. Well, they had been fine on the way here, so they could probably make it back... but that wasn't something Haruhiro was optimistic enough to think. It was a miracle that they had made it to Well Village without encountering any yegyorns. He couldn't expect the miracle to happen twice.

If they were going to count on a miracle to get them to the Dusk Realm, that was a huge gamble. Even if it worked out, was there any hope for them in the Dusk Realm? He couldn't say there was none, but they would have to hunt for that seed of hope while being chased around by the cultists, the white giants, and the hydras. That didn't sound easy. It sounded really, incredibly difficult.

The second option was to somehow get through the Fire Dragon Mountain that was on the other side of Waluandin, then somehow reach the foggy place. That was in dangerous enemy territory, but even setting that aside for the moment, Waluandin was going to be a problem. Was there no way to reach Fire Dragon Mountain without passing through Waluandin, which was packed full of orcs? Even if there was some good way of doing it, there was still the fire dragon there.

—*Yeah, no.*

He couldn't see any potential there. Zero. Those were the odds, or very close to them.

What then?

It might be time to accept things as they were. They would forget Grimgar for now, and live here. Here in Darunggar. If nothing special came up, they might live out the rest of their lives in this place.

What did they have to do to manage that? They had to share their knowledge, work together, and build a stable basis for their lifestyles. Step by

step. They could move forward at their own pace, without rushing things.

Could they live in such a different world without any issues? They had Mr. Unjo as a living testament to the fact it was possible. Mr. Unjo was awfully pale, probably due to a lack of sun, but he seemed healthy enough. They could live for a decade or two.

With the reality shoved in Haruhiro's face, it finally began to set in.

Hey, it could work, right? This place is fine in its own way. I mean, Grimgar wasn't our homeland to begin with—I'm pretty sure. When we came to, we were in Grimgar. We were forced to live there. That's all.

This world was dark. Too dark, honestly, and it left him feeling gloomy. He didn't know the language well, either. Besides, there were basically no humans. It was full of danger. He had a lot of concerns about the place, but they could probably be overcome. They'd get used to it eventually.

Besides, unlike Mr. Unjo, Haruhiro still had his comrades. He wasn't alone. His circumstances weren't as bad as Mr. Unjo's.

Even as he realized it wasn't like him to do this, he dared to think cheerfully and optimistically about the future.

Grimgar had been the first chapter in their story. Now, the second chapter had begun in Darunggar. There would probably be a third and fourth chapter to come. He hoped it would continue on, at least.

The next stage might be here in Darunggar, or maybe elsewhere. He'd never been able to predict where it was going before. This was the same. It was all a big unknown. Things might not always be good, but they shouldn't always be bad, either. If there were troubles, there had to be joys to be found, too. Even in gloomy Darunggar, it wasn't all darkness. There was light, too.

"Well." Mr. Unjo stood up and shouldered his pack. "I think you get it now. That there's no returning to Grimgar. You see now the reasons why. I'm going back to Herbesit. You do as you please."

Haruhiro closed his eyes and nodded. He couldn't stand for them to be left behind here. They would turn back, too. It wouldn't be right to impose upon Mr. Unjo's kindness too much, but he wanted to maintain a good relationship

with the man. After all, they were fellow humans, and volunteer soldiers—no, former volunteer soldiers. Mr. Unjo was their senior in that respect. Haruhiro wanted to be able to count on his advice and tutelage going forward.

For now, thought Haruhiro, let's follow Mr. Unjo, doing our best not to be too much of a burden, and not to annoy him. Let's do that.

"We're—" Haruhiro began to say, but then his eyes went wide. "...Seriously?"

He stuck his hand down his shirt and pulled that thing out.

At a time like this? I mean, seriously?

It was a black, flat, stone-like object. But it was no rock. It vibrated, and the lower end was glowing green.

"The receiver..." Shihoru whispered.

"What's that?" Mr. Unjo pushed up the brim of his braided hat, his eyes shining. "Is it an otherworldly item?"

"Haruhiro," came the voice from the receiver.

"...Soma-san." Haruhiro's hands, and his voice, trembling and shaking even harder than the receiver.

His comrades gathered around, desperate to hear what he'd say.

"Are you listening?" Soma's voice said. "Haruhiro. How many times have I called you now? We're in Grimgar. Akira and Tokimune and their groups are all right, too."

"Oh, man..." Ranta was half tearing up. "Yeah, of course... Of course they would be. Damn straight they're all right. Man, I just... I'm so glad. Yeah. We're in a bad spot, but I'm glad..."

"Haruhiro. Ranta. Yume. Shihoru. Merry. Kuzaku," Soma's voice said. "I know you're all out there somewhere, listening to this. I believe in you."

"...Damn." Kuzaku held his head. "Soma-san called me by name..."

"How many times—" Merry hung her head.

How many times has he called? was probably what she meant to ask.

“We’re looking forward to seeing you all again,” Soma said. “It’s not just me. Everyone’s saying that.”

“Whew...” Yume fell flat on her butt.

“Kemuri,” Soma’s voice added.

“Hmm,” said Kemuri’s voice. “How’s it going?”

“Shima.”

“Yeah,” said Shima’s voice. “...Haruhiro. Do you remember what I said? Let’s talk about it next time.”

“Hm? What’s this about?” asked Soma.

“Oh, my. Does it interest you, Soma?”

“Yeah. It does. Well, I guess it’s fine. Here, Lilia.”

“I have nothing to say to a bunch of immature kids,” said Lilia. “Just... try to be careful. Believe in yourself, and your comrades. You must always look and listen to what’s important, and turn your heart to the light, not the darkness. If you never stop walking, eventually you’ll find a path. Now, listen here. If you give up, I will never forgive you. Th-That’s all!”

“For having nothing to say, she’s sure talking a lot, huh?!” Ranta sniffled. “Ohhh, Lilia-san’s so cuuuute! I wanna see her again...”

“Pingo?” said Soma.

“Drop dead. Uheheheh... I kid. Hey, Soma... You can try to make Zenmai talk, but it won’t work. You moron... Uheheheh...”

“Oh, I see,” said Soma. “Well, it’s not just us. Akira-san, Miho-san, Gogh-san, Kayo-san, Branken, and Taro, too, they’re all worried about you. Then there’s Rock, Kajita, Moyugi, Kuro, Sakanami, Tsuga, Io, Katazu, Tasukete, Jam, Tonbe, and Gomi. You haven’t met them yet, I guess. I told them all about you guys. Everyone’s interested in you.”

“The Rocks and Io-sama’s Squad!” Ranta squirmed a little. “And wait, what kind of names are Tasukete and Gomi? That’s like being called Help Me and Trash! Well, whatever, I hear Io-sama is a total hottie. Damn, I wanna see her...”

“He never lets up...” Shihoru said coldly. “But—”

“Haruhiro.” Soma called each of their names once more, as if carving them out. “Ranta. Yume. Shihoru. Merry. Kuzaku. We’ll be waiting. See you.”

The receiver stopped vibrating, and the light on the lower end vanished.

Haruhiro was still holding the receiver, unable to even breathe properly.

“Akira, he said?” Mr. Unjo suddenly let out a low laugh. “And Gogh? Preposterous. It’s impossible. No way...”

“...You know them?” Kuzaku hesitantly asked.

“I know *of* them—” Mr. Unjo stopped and let out a sigh. “They’re not necessarily the same people. They’re different people with the same names. Most likely...”

Akira and Gogh were the same age, and had both been volunteer soldiers for twenty years. Haruhiro didn’t know their exact ages, but he figured they were probably in their forties. Mr. Unjo had to be around there, too. It wouldn’t be strange if he did know them.

Haruhiro took a deep breath. His mind was still numbed to the core. “I think they must be Akira-san and Gogh-san.”

“Soman was sayin’ he called a buncha times,” Yume said in a fluffy, half-dreaming voice. “So why’d we never hear it before now?”

“Hold on, Soman—” Haruhiro started to correct her, but decided against it.

The nickname’s fine, I guess, he thought. No, maybe it isn’t? I wonder. I don’t really know anymore.

“Maybe...” Merry looked beyond Waluandin. “...it’s because we’re close?”

“That’s it!” Ranta pointed at Merry. “Merry, girl, you’re smart! Well, I’d figured that out, too, and was just about to say it, though!”

“Girl? Huh? What?” asked Merry. “I take it you never want to get healed again?”

“...Ah! Sorry, I-I got a little too chummy there. I need to be more polite, milady. My bad. No, seriously, seriously. It won’t happen again. So, forgive me!

Pwease!”

“That pwease was infuriating...” Shihoru muttered.

Haruhiro agreed.

But setting that aside for now...

“We’re close, huh?” Haruhiro looked down at the receiver. “I see. So we’re close. We’re close to Grimgar.”

Yume held her hand tightly against the center of her chest. “Yume, she wants to go home. Yume wants to see Master, too. If she couldn’t ever see him again, well, Yume wouldn’t like that.”

“Yeah...” Kuzaku looked up to the dark sky. “I’ve gotta agree.”

Stop it, Haruhiro thought. Please, just stop. Don’t tell me the truth like that.

Because even if that’s how you really feel, it’s just not possible. If you were to ask if I want to go home or not, yeah, I wanna go home. I mean, I wouldn’t even joke about wanting to stay here forever. What choice do we have, though? If we try to go back, we’re guaranteed to be risking our lives. If we do risk them, there’s no guarantee it’ll pay off, and I can’t imagine it would.

I can’t be adventurous like that. I can’t let you be, either. I don’t want to lose anyone. I don’t want to let you die. We’re gonna live. All of us. That’s the best option.

“If you give up, I will never forgive you,” Lilia had said. What was that supposed to mean? That they should not give up, and they should struggle, and survive? Or...

“We’ll be waiting,” Soma had said, too.

“See you,” he’d said.

“We can’t take risks,” Haruhiro said clearly. “Not risks that are that big, no way. But what we can do is secure our safety, while taking our time to look for a way.”

“Huh?” Ranta crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. “What’s that mean, basically?”

“...Huh?” Kuzaku asked. “Are you stupid?”

“Kuzacky! You’re mocking your super senior! I’ll throw shit at you, you jerk!”

“That’s filthy! Geez!” Yume scowled. “Basically, it means that. It means that, right? So... it’s that, right? Right...?”

“You don’t get it either!” Ranta shouted.

“We’ll do our best not to put ourselves in danger, and we’ll stay careful,” Shihoru said emphatically. “We continuously move forward with our investigation, and if someday, we reach our goal—”

“—we can go back,” Merry finished for her. She bit her lip. “To Grimgar.”

“That’s what it means, right?” Ranta said, puffing up his chest arrogantly. “I know that, you moron.”

With his pack on his back again, Mr. Unjo turned to go. “Do as you please.”

Even if he could return, Mr. Unjo wouldn’t. It might not be for a simple reason like, *I have Rubicia*, but he would still choose to stay in Darunggar. That was what it felt like.

Well, different strokes for different folks.

Haruhiro bowed his head deeply. “Umm... thank you so much, Unjo-san. For everything. Really!”

Mr. Unjo stopped. He didn’t turn back. “...Don’t die, my juniors.”

16. A Good Day to Wait for a Better Day



There was a mountain of things that needed to be considered, and a mountain of things that needed to be done.

For a start, Haruhiro decided to test how close he could actually get to Waluandin. He didn't need his comrades for that. Or rather, Haruhiro was better off on his own. In fact, not operating solo would have been bad.

Haruhiro made use of Stealth, which Barbara-sensei had taught him, and headed towards Waluandin alone.

Waluandin seemed to have been built at the foot of Fire Dragon Mountain. There was a basin at the foot of the mountain. Haruhiro was trying to cut across the basin to reach Waluandin, but it wasn't exactly an empty field. There were villages dotted around the basin.

The villages were made up of anywhere from ten to a few dozen igloo-like buildings, and there were hot springs welling up all over the place. Though it was from a distance, he even managed to spot the residents.

They were humanoid and green-skinned. With smushed noses. Large tusks protruded from their mouths. They had broad, thick frames, and were tall, too. From every angle, they looked just like orcs. They couldn't be anything else. They wore nothing but short pants, going naked up top. It wasn't just warm here, it was kind of hot, so they probably didn't need shirts. Their whole bodies were smooth. Did they shave, or just not grow body hair?

Incidentally, there were female orcs, too, and they wrapped cloth around their chests and heads.

The orcs in the villages were digging in the dirt, and doing some sort of work at a shelf. He was able to observe them raising large caterpillar-like creatures in

pens. They were a bit like the pigworms he had seen before at the Cyrene Mines. Were they for eating, perhaps?

There were holes dug in the ground, and he was able to see that they were doing something or another inside of them. These were farming villages, possibly producing food for Waluandin.

The farmer orcs had such impressive physiques that Haruhiro grew worried. No, these were farmers, so they had grown strong by working every day, and that was why they had such muscular bodies. He wanted to think that was it.

But aren't all of them, male or female, bigger than the ones we fought at Deadhead Watching Keep? he thought. *Am I imagining that? I hope so...*

The orc villagers were busy working, so they never noticed Haruhiro. What if he hadn't been alone, and his comrades had come with him? It was hard to say, but if he'd paid the utmost attention to their every move, it might have been manageable. Besides, the orcs probably didn't work day in and day out. Because of the lava, it was hard to tell how bright the sky was, but, well, he figured they went home and slept at night.

Whatever the case, Haruhiro was able to slip past the orc villages without difficulty. Of course, it took a fair amount of time. If he went by his unreliable internal sense of time, it took maybe three hours. If he kept the path he took in his head, he could probably shave that down by half. The problem would be everything that came after that.

Beyond the area with the villages, there was a river of lava flowing. If they crossed it, they'd be in the city streets of Waluandin. This river was less than a meter across, there were many bridges across it, and they could probably even jump over it. It seemed like it was a simple borderline.

The city streets were lined with square-ish buildings. Based on the layout of their windows, they were all two-story, but they were awfully short for that to be the case. It looked like the first floor must be half-underground. Their doors probably all faced away from the river.

Haruhiro saw a number of orcs sitting in the doorless windows with their legs dangling down. They were awfully thin and tiny for orcs. Children.

Could he cross the river without being spotted by the orc children, and successfully enter the city? Haruhiro was cowardly, so he didn't really feel up to it. He was sure it would be suicide to enter Waluandin from the front.

Haruhiro followed the river of magma to the left, continuing on and on. Eventually, he started to hear a familiar sound. This was the sound of hammers. In a large workshop which was just a bunch of poles with a roof over them, there were some way-too-muscular orcs swinging their hammers.

Waluandin's smithy made effective use of lava. They didn't have to light fires, just draw high-temperature lava into their furnace. It probably wasn't just the smithy; nowhere in Waluandin would have any need for fuel. It would be incredibly dangerous if they messed up, but still convenient.

The workshop district went on for quite a ways. The orcs of Waluandin worked metal, manufacturing quite a variety of products in large quantities. Naturally, that meant that they needed raw materials.

When Haruhiro reached the end of the workshop district, the lava river came to a stop, and a rock wall appeared. He didn't think there was any way he could climb that rock wall, but there were holes bored into it. Large holes.

The orcs went in and out of them. They were pushing wagons filled with something. It had to be ore. There was an ore pile, too. This had to be a mine.

He saw an orc who seemed to have a foreman-like role, too. That orc wore shoulder and hip guards that gave off a dim light, carried a long stick, and acted like he was important. He was also noticeably larger than the rest.

This was all just Haruhiro eyeballing things, but the orcs in the farming villages had been two meters and thirty centimeters, maybe? The orcs working the smithy hadn't been taller, but they'd had much broader shoulders and thicker frames. The miner orcs were around the same as the farmer orcs, maybe? The foreman orc, though, looking at him, he might well be a full three meters.

There was one more thing.

Haruhiro had initially thought that the big orc was something like a foreman. But that was wrong.

There was more than one big orc. There were several. Although there was

less than one of them for every ten miner orcs. It was possible that, rather than a difference in position, they belonged to a different social class.

Either way, if they were that well-built, and armed to boot, they had to be tough. The mine looked dangerous.

When he finished his investigation of Waluandin, Haruhiro headed back to where his comrades were.

Ranta asked, “Well? How was it? Huh? Huh? Huh?” and made a real pain of himself, so while Haruhiro was eating some of the less-than-delicious preserved food they’d brought with them, he quickly related what he had seen. He was a little... no, incredibly... tired, so he laid down and passed out.

When he woke, his comrades, who had been taking shifts observing the villages while Haruhiro was sleeping, had a report for him.

Yume went first. “In the night, the orcies, they go beddy-bye, like you were thinkin’.”

When Yume described them, the orcs turned into orcies, and it made them sound like adorable little creatures, but that was an illusion, of course.

“But for Waluandin, there wasn’t much of a change... I think?” Shihoru didn’t seem confident. “I do know the villages were asleep until a little while ago, though.”

“I was out like a light and didn’t see anything, got it?” Ranta announced.

“Why do you sound so proud?” Merry sounded absolutely mystified. “Because you’re off in the head? Because you’re rotten to the core? Hey, why is it? Could you tell me?”

“Excuuuuse meeee,” Ranta sneered. “Haven’t you been a bit harsh with the jabs at me lately? It wouldn’t kill you to be a bit nicer, okay?”

“I dunno about that...” Kuzaku muttered.

“Hey, Kuzacky! You’re my underling! Don’t try to get smart with me!”

Today, the party decided to try slipping past the villages as a group. Haruhiro wished he could leave just Ranta behind, but he couldn’t.

Though Haruhiro had gotten the hang of it during his solo scouting trip yesterday, he had also foreseen the difficulties involved. When they actually tried it, just having the six of them walking together made them stand out to an unusual degree. Even though there were places where he had been able to lay low when he was alone, they were often too tight for a group of six. He tried to follow the same basic route he had taken the other day, but they were almost discovered by farmer orcs on multiple occasions. It took a lot of time and effort to move forward even a little, so Haruhiro occasionally felt ready to give in and turn back.

With the exception of Ranta, his comrades were cooperative, and they followed Haruhiro's orders obediently. But that was about all they did. If Haruhiro didn't think, make a decision, and then tell them to do this or that, none of them would do anything. That was probably because there was nothing they could do. They had no choice. He understood that, but it still pissed him off.

There were times when he felt ready to snap. When he did, he'd take a deep breath. He couldn't help getting emotional. He just had to make sure he didn't let his emotions control him. Actually, if he let his emotions swing him around, he'd get exhausted, and that could lead to mistakes.

This was just going by his internal sense of time, but it took four, maybe five hours to reach Waluandin. Even if they were to repeat the trip over and over, they weren't likely to see any drastic reductions in that time. For Haruhiro alone, it had probably taken an hour and a half. That meant it had taken three times longer with six people. They would burn a third of a day just to go there and come back.

Hiding themselves near the lava river in front of Waluandin was hard for six people, too. Haruhiro was a thief, so even without objects to hide behind, he could lie down or crouch down and use Stealth in some cases, but that was out of the question for his comrades. If they stayed in one place, they'd be found. They had to keep moving.

The blacksmiths were to the left, and the mine was past there. Haruhiro and the others went right. Occasionally there were orc children sitting in the windows of the square-ish buildings across the river of lava. They were looking

around a lot, so the party had to be careful.

“Orcies’re cute when they’re little,” Yume whispered quietly.

“How?” Ranta spat distastefully. “You call them little, but they’re probably bigger than you or me...”

“Size’s got nothin’ to do with it.”

“Yeah, it does. They’ve got some pretty vicious looking mugs, too...”

“They’re just lookin’ out here ’cause they’re bored,” Yume said. “Ranta, you’re just seein’ ’em that way ’cause you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Ranta retorted. “In a fight, I could take them easy. If you think I’m lying, I don’t mind proving it. I mean, I’m not scared, after all. I’m seriously not scared.”

Thanks to this idiot (and piece of trash), Haruhiro broke into a cold sweat, worried that the orc children would detect them, but fortunately nothing like that ever happened. They did, however, come to a dead end.

When they reached the edge of the square-ish, two-story buildings, it opened up past there. That’s not to say it was an empty lot. There was an incredible number of orcs. It was noisy. With all the voices, it sounded almost like they were shouting at one another. With all those things laid out on the ground, was that one selling stuff? Was it a shop? There were carts, too. He spotted orcs who were standing or sitting as they ate and drank. It was like a marketplace and an area for entertainment rolled into one. It looked like it was pretty chaotic. Haruhiro didn’t know what was so fun about jumping back and forth around a river of lava, but there were orcs laughing with their throaty voices, too.

It was dangerous to approach. They’d definitely be found. It would be possible to take the long way around to avoid them, but they’d have to go back into the area with the villages for that.

Taking various factors into consideration, Haruhiro decided to turn back. For now at least, they’d go to Herbesit.

They should move forward with their investigation of Waluandin slowly and

carefully. It wasn't something they could do in a day or two. It was going to take a good deal of preparation. When it came to food, they couldn't just acquire it on the spot. In the end, the only option was to return to town.

Even though they were just going back the way they came, Haruhiro felt keenly how helpless they were without Mr. Unjo there to guide them. Once they rested by the Hot Spring River, there were no more chances to let his guard down. Every time they encountered one of the crested crocodiles known as nivles in the ruins of Alluja, he felt like his heart was being ground down, and there were injuries, too.

They crossed the bridge over the reddish-brown Dendoro River, and were repeatedly tackled by skards in the Field of Bones, Zetesidona.

When the farms west of Herbesit came into sight, Haruhiro's sense of tension broke despite his best efforts to maintain it, and he started to tear up. Would he ever feel like going back to Waluandin? He might not. He never wanted to go to Zetesidona or Alluja. Or see orcs, for that matter. Couldn't they just decide to live in Darunggar now? No...?

Well, Herbesit was a pretty dangerous city itself, so he got himself back in the right mindset, and they made it to the underground somehow. Once they finished shopping there, though, he was at a loss for what to do.

They weren't with Mr. Unjo, so it felt wrong somehow for them to visit Rubicia's tower. Haruhiro and the others weren't Zeran, so they couldn't stay in the underground, either. The people above ground in Herbesit were noisy, and frightening.

What now? What should they do?

"Hey, even up top, there're good people, like Mr. Unjo's wife," Ranta opined. "Maybe there's something like an inn, where they'll let us stay if we just pay them? If we look, there's probably one somewhere, don't you think? I mean, there's gotta be. Kuzacky. You go nip up top and find one for us real quick. We'll be waiting down here. I'll even be nice and wait for you, okay?"

"Why'd you make it sound like you'd be doing me a favor? And wait, why me?" Kuzaku complained.

“Because you’re the lowest ranked here, duh! I mean, you’re my gofer, right? You’re my gofer, so you’ve gotta do what I tell you, y’know?”

“I don’t really get what you’re saying.”

“Oh? Acting all rebellious now? I don’t mind. I’ll take you on anytime you want. I’ll beat your ass, though. You want that? Huh?”

“...This is the first time I’ve wanted to set that curly hair of yours on fire, Ranta-kun.”

“What? Did you just call my hair curly? You did, didn’t you?! Curly!”

“It *is* curly, though, isn’t it?” Merry said coldly.

“...Curly.” Shihoru said it, too.

“It sure is curly, huh.” And Yume.

“You jerks! Curly, curly, curly, curly, you keep saying it! People who call me curly are the ones who are really curly! Don’t you know that?!”

“Hey, curly hair has done you no wrong, so don’t be besmirching its good name, Curly...” Haruhiro said.

He sighed as he looked around. Herbesit’s underground had originally been the aqueducts and graves, so there was only water flowing in some places, and most of it was just underground tunnels. It was dank, but there was a refreshing smell hanging in the air, too. The people here might be mixing something like mint oils in with the fuel for the lamps that were lit here and there. Maybe thanks in part to that scent, the customers who came to shop in the underground marketplace were calm, and relatively quiet. When the party made a ruckus like this, the Zeran who had shops open on either side of this tunnel looked clearly bothered by it. It seemed like it would be best to shut Ranta up, or silence him permanently, then beat a hasty retreat before they got thrown out.

After thinking over a number of options, Haruhiro and the others decided to return home. To Well Village.

They’d considered the idea of using Herbesit as their base of operations while searching the ruins of Alluja for tablets they could sell at a high price. But

Herbesit was just going to be too hard to live in.

They prepared a bell, crossed the forest, and headed for the charcoal burner's place. The charcoal burner didn't exactly give them a warm welcome, but he didn't try to drive Haruhiro and the others away, either. They rested in the corner of his place for a night, and when they woke, the charcoal burner was preparing to take his wagon out.

When they signaled that they were willing to help him out, he didn't refuse, so they helped load the wagon. They accompanied the charcoal burner's wagon back to Well Village. They didn't have a house here or anything, but it was amazing how much it felt like they had come home.

The residents of Well Village were all taciturn, but the giant grocer crab smiled and spoke cheerfully, happy to see Haruhiro and his group again. It was hard to read the giant crab's expression, but at the very least, he looked like he was smiling to Haruhiro, and his voice seemed happy. That's how it sounded.

They talked about what to do next while eating in front of the grocery store, but not one of them raised the name of Waluandin. Should Haruhiro make a point of bringing it up himself? He debated that internally for a while, but ultimately didn't.

Haste makes waste. Now is the time for patience. Let's wait for the time to be ripe. He could think of any number of reasons, but, ultimately, he just decided to wait for a better day.

17. Racing Past Today and Tomorrow



Even with that said, after spending ten days working in the City of the Dead Ones, Haruhiro began to wonder if things were all right like this. And it wasn't just him; apparently everyone felt that way.

When hunting for prey in the City of the Dead Ones, there were times when they weren't all focused properly on the task at hand. Obviously, when they were actually fighting a dead one, everyone got their butts in gear, but they were clearly having a hard time getting over it. It was the same for Haruhiro, so he understood keenly what they were going through.

It took some courage, but as the leader, he suggested that maybe it was time for them to go back. No one objected.

This time, they planned in advance for a fifteen-day trip. It might be a few days longer or shorter depending on the circumstances, so they built in some elasticity to cover for that. Once they decided it wouldn't be a long-term stay, he suddenly felt more motivated.

That's right, he thought. No use dragging it out. Staying focused over a short period is best.

Their second trip to Waluandin went pretty smoothly, considering they didn't have Mr. Unjo with them.

We've gotten used to Darunggar, was a thing Haruhiro had to avoid thinking. Getting used to things was scary. It was probably best to jump at every little thing, and to feel the pain in his stomach.

Haruhiro scouted out Waluandin on his own. That was overwhelmingly more efficient, and it was less dangerous, too.

Past the entertainment quarter, he found an area that was packed densely

with igloo-like houses similar to those he had seen in the villages. That was where the lower-class orcs lived, apparently. The slums, you could call it. Even on the really steep hills, there were igloos built as if they were stuck onto them. He had to admit that was kind of impressive.

Fire Dragon Mountain was on the other side of Waluandin. There was a path there, somewhere, which supposedly led to Grimgar.

In broad terms, there were two ways to reach Fire Dragon Mountain. One was to make it through Waluandin. The other was to travel around Waluandin and cross the mountains.

If they were going to cross the mountains, they would have to pass along the outside of the mine or the slums. Both areas were pretty dangerous, so they'd want specialized equipment for the task.

Incidentally, if Haruhiro were asked what that specialized equipment might be, he'd have had no answer. He was no specialist, after all. Even their outdoor specialist, Yume the hunter, had no experience with climbing mountains. If they were going to try to cross the mountains, it was going to take thorough preparation. It wouldn't be the next thing they did, but the thing after the next thing, no doubt.

If they were going to try to make it through Waluandin, they'd have to aim for a time when the orcs were less active, and choose a place the orcs weren't likely to find them.

They knew that the orcs in the villages seemed to sleep at night, so it stood to reason that the orcs in Waluandin did the same. Making full use of Stealth to investigate on his own, Haruhiro had been able to see that the Waluandin orcs, waluos for short, made a distinction between night and day in their lives.

The entertainment quarter was bustling with waluos at all times. However, it looked there were more waluos there in the afternoon and night, and less in the early morning and before noon. For both the workshops and the mine, no one worked there at night. The slums were always kind of noisy.

Then again, at the present moment, Haruhiro only knew what he could discern from his side of the lava river that served as the city's border. Even if they could sneak through the mine or workshop district at night, there might be

obstacles past there that would prevent them from going any farther.

He wanted to infiltrate Waluandin and learn more somehow, but he really couldn't bring his comrades for that. If he were to come out and say it bluntly, not that he would say anything at all, anyone he brought would just get in the way. This was one thing Haruhiro would have to do alone.

Now for the next task. This time, they decided not to get greedy, and when the predetermined fifteen-day period was up, Haruhiro and the others safely returned to Well Village. They spent the next day heading out to the City of the Dead Ones and earning money.

For the next day, and the next next day, and the next next next day, and the next next next next day, and the next next next next next day, and the next next next next next next day, and the next next next next next next next day, they worked hard in the City of the Dead Ones.

Hunting was a volunteer soldier's job, but they couldn't let it become too routine. Haruhiro and his party had earned the nickname the Goblin Slayers, so they were used to spending a stupid amount of time frequenting the same hunting grounds—they were even pretty good at it—but they also knew to be afraid of getting used to things.

"Urgh!" Kuzaku was earnestly trying to hold off a violent assault by a lion dead one.

Not just with his shield. He used his longsword for defense, too. He lowered his center of gravity while being careful not to end up in an unbalanced position, then held in there. He was holding in there.

He kept a fixed distance from the lion dead one. Kuzaku was making fine adjustments to his positioning based on how his opponent moved. He did a splendid job of staying at that range, and the lion dead one seemed to be having a hard time with it. One-on-one, Kuzaku could keep the lion dead one occupied. He'd gotten to the point where he could.

Everyone acknowledged that Kuzaku was improving as a tank. They trusted him, too. That was why Merry could move up at times like this and trip the lion dead one with her head staff.

Kuzaku would never let the lion dead one get away. If she didn't think that, Merry wouldn't be able to leave Shihoru's side.

Incidentally, Merry wasn't crazy strong or anything, but the priest's self-defense techniques had been created to help the weak defend themselves, and developed from that starting point. Making use of centrifugal force, or something like that, she amplified her weak power into powerful blows against those who meant to harm her. If she got a clean hit in, her individual strikes could be more powerful than Ranta's.

The lion dead one tripped. Kuzaku was quick to jump on it... or not.

"Gwahaha!" It was Ranta. Ranta, who had been watching closely for his chance, used Leap Out to jump in and assault the lion dead one. His willingness to go all in at times like this was his one praiseworthy quality. His black blade plunged through the lion dead one's right eyeball. "Take that!"

"Get back!" shouted Haruhiro.

Ranta jumped back and away, possibly even before he heard the words. His black blade was left stuck in the thing's eyeball. Even as it writhed in pain, the thing had tried to hug Ranta with all its love. In other words, Ranta had gotten away before he'd had his back broken by its deadly embrace.

"Eheh... Let there be curses..." Zodiac-kun, who was floating nearby, said something either auspicious or ominous, and it was hard to tell which.

The lion dead one rose up. Yume let loose an arrow, but it twisted to avoid it. Right after her, Shihoru cried, "Dark!" and sent out her elemental.

The humanoid, or more like star-shaped, elemental Dark sank into the lion dead one's chest. It immediately began convulsing and fell to one knee.

"Hah!" Kuzaku made a big swing with his longsword and slugged the thing in the side of its head with it. He then followed that up by whacking it in the chin with his shield.

"Yeah!" Merry slammed its neck with her head staff.

"There!" Ranta leapt at the thing. He tore his black blade free, then slashed it. He slashed at it. Even if he couldn't cut it, he slashed it like crazy. Whenever

Ranta took a rest, Kuzaku and Merry gave it one or two hits, and then Ranta went back and resumed his flurry of blows.

Haruhiro watched over his comrades as they fought, paying attention to their surroundings. Yume, who was next to Shihoru, had nocked an arrow and was also on guard.

Haruhiro and the others had relocated their hunting grounds in the City of the Dead Ones from the Northwest Quarter, where the remains of the marketplace and the Warehouse District were, to a place just inside the Southwest Quarter. If they'd continued taking things in steps, the Southeast Quarter would have been the next level up after the Northwest Quarter, but the east side was mostly covered in mist.

The dead ones of the Southwest Quarter were clever and vicious, but Haruhiro and the others had found that in the area closest to the Northwest Quarter, dead ones that were comparatively easy to take down would show up.

They were mostly ones like the lion dead one they were fighting right now. There was no questioning that they were powerful enemies. Even so, if they all focused their efforts properly, they had gotten to the point where they could practically guarantee they'd be able to take one of them down.

Enemies on this level were good. Even if they wanted to relax, they couldn't. It wasn't impossible, but they couldn't just defeat them in a routine manner. Instead of a moderate level of tension, it was just a bit higher than that. They had to improve themselves, adjusting things day by day, or they'd never survive. But as long as they did things right, they could manage.

"Haru-kun." Yume gestured towards a building to the south with her chin.

"Hm?" Haruhiro squinted at the building.

There was something poking its head out from the collapsed second floor section. No, it just looked like it might be. That was all.

Haruhiro shook his head. "No. It's fine."

"Yume got it wrong, huh. Sorry 'bout that."

"Hey, it's fine."

“Take that! Let Skullhell embrace you!” Ranta landed the finishing blow on the lion dead one. “Bwahahahaha! I’ll drink well again tonight!”

“What are you, a mountain bandit?” Haruhiro muttered with a sigh. Haruhiro was a thief himself, but he didn’t want to think he was in the same class as Ranta. He absolutely was not.

They hunted in the City of the Dead Ones for ten days, then left on another roughly fifteen-day expedition. When they did it like this, they could spend their days looking forward to the next one.

It wasn’t good to think too much about the future, but if they only ever had their eyes on what was directly in front of them, it became suffocating. Striking a balance was important. If all they did was charge blindly towards shining hope, they would neglect to watch their feet and fall into danger. Likewise, if they kept looking down under the weight of despair, they would grow exhausted and unable to walk.

They couldn’t live on hard times alone, and good times were never going to last forever. It was best to cry when they felt like crying, and smile sometimes even when they didn’t feel like smiling.

In the middle of their third expedition, though Haruhiro only heard about this afterward because he was out investigating alone at the time, Ranta and the others were attacked by orcs. There were two orcs, and though they managed to kill them somehow, Kuzaku and Yume were both wounded and things looked bad for a while.

Both of those orcs had looked thin, and young. They’d worn no armor, but carried bows and arrows, swords, and knives. They’d been outfitted like hunters. It might be that they’d headed out to hunt, and chanced across Ranta and the others.

With this event serving as a trigger, they’d changed the location where the other five stayed on standby during their fourth expedition and moved to a spot near the Hot Spring River instead. Haruhiro had Ranta and the others hunt gujis, which were like badgers, while he moved forward with his exploration of Waluandin. He’d gotten to the point where he could slip into the city at night, if he was alone.

During their fifth expedition, they found a small stone tablet in the ruins of Alluja. When they returned to Well Village and showed it to Oubu the Eyehand Sage, the sage bought it off them for a large coin, 1 rou.

When they were camping outside the village later, Ranta said, “You know...” and started talking with uncharacteristic degree of sincerity. “I can sort of understand how the people here felt, clinging to Skullhell. When it’s this dark, it’d make anyone want to be embraced by Skullhell.”

“It’s easier to understand why they clung to Lumiaris,” Merry countered. “When it’s this dark, the normal thing is to seek the light.”

“I’m sure that’s normal for you,” Ranta retorted. “But listen, you, what’s normal is different for everyone, you know that?”

“‘You’?” she repeated.

“...I am really sorry,” Ranta said without emotion. “Merry-san, please, forgive me.”

“He’s not putting his heart into it at all...” Shihoru said.

Ranta got down and performed a kowtow. “I’m so sowwy! I was wong! Fogibe me!”

“There’s nothing more worthless than a kowtow from you,” Haruhiro said with a wry smile as he poked the fire with a stick. “...Gods, huh. It just doesn’t feel real to me. I mean, there’re actually gods. They exist. I always thought they were, like, fictional? Or something...”

“If they weren’t real, I couldn’t use light magic.” Merry showed him the palm of her hand. “But until I came here, I might not have fully believed in them myself, either.”

“Oh, yeah.” Kuzaku nodded. “I could see that. Gods are like an example for us, y’know. Or the source for one? The reason? The basis? Something like that. Like, there’s Lumiaris, and if we assume she’s always watching, we can behave righteously, maybe?”

“Elhit-chan the White God’s real.” Yume was resting her head in Shihoru’s lap, while also having Merry attached to her leg. “Elhit-chan shows up in Yume’s

dreams and everything. Yume wishes she could meet Elhit-chan..."

"So, let's talk seriously here." Ranta disabled his kowtow mode, switched to sitting with his legs crossed, and crossed his arms cheekily. "Really, everyone's afraid of dying and stuff, right? Since we're alive, we don't want to die. But still. We're gonna die. Someday, for sure, we're gonna bite it. There's no getting out of it. It's the conclusion of our lives, you could say. When you think about that, I dunno... It feels overwhelming, right? It's hard to deal with, maybe."

"...Even for you?" Haruhiro asked, struck by an unexpected feeling.

Ranta snorted and laughed. It was a laugh that felt forced, somehow.

"I'm talking generally, man, generally. I'm above and beyond all this stuff. Besides, dying is just a part of my life, right? Even if other people's deaths feel, well... y'know. You've got to accept your own death, or you can't live. You're born, and then you die, and that's life. Basically, it's a cycle, man, a cycle." Ranta spun his index finger around in circles. "I'm sure you people don't get it, but Skullhell's teachings include views on life and death like that."

"We have that in Lumiaris's teachings, too, of course," Merry said quietly as she rubbed Yume's thigh. "In the beginning, there was light. All life is born from that light, and will return to it. That's why we see the light when we die."

"When we die, we fall into the darkness, obviously," Ranta snorted.

"No we do not. Darkness is only a side effect produced by the light not shining somewhere. If you avert your eyes from the light, you'll be mired in darkness. That's all."

"You're wrong. Darkness is the original, and the light came after it. I'm telling you, the root of all things is darkness."

"This is why I can never get along with a dread knight who blindly follows Skullhell," Merry muttered.

"I don't need to get along with you! I don't want anything to do with the cowardly believers of Lumiaris!"

"Don't fight over this nonsense." Haruhiro tried to step in as leader and mediate, but both Merry and Ranta turned to glare at him.

“Nonsense?!”

“Whaddaya mean, nonsense?!” Ranta yelled.

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Both...” Shihoru helped him out. “Can’t it be both? In the beginning, there was light and darkness. I think they’re conflicting but complimentary elements...”

“Like everyone here, huh.” Yume rubbed her cheek against Shihoru’s lap, speaking in a relaxed tone. “It’s ’cause everyone’s there for her that Yume’s able to keep on livin’, y’know.”

That got everyone to settle down.

Well, since they were always together, conversations like this were bound to happen. The guys were always talking about pretty stupid stuff, but what was it like for the girls? Did they talk about love and romance, maybe? Maybe not? Or did they? Though Haruhiro was curious, he couldn’t ask them, so that mystery was going to remain a mystery to him forever.

Ranta used the 10 rou worth of black coins that he had saved to buy a two-handed sword from the blacksmith of Well Village. It was a two-handed sword, so the hilt was long, but the blade itself wasn’t that large, which made it surprisingly light.

Most swords had an unsharpened section just above the base of the blade called the ricasso. The ricasso on the sword Ranta had bought was long, and had a protuberance at the top of it. When he used to it strike a finishing blow, gripping the ricasso apparently made that easier for him, and there were other uses for it, too. Knowing Ranta, he would come up with all sorts of things through trial and error.

He named his sword RIPer, and bought armored gloves so he could hold the ricasso good and tight. By the way, he’d borrowed the money for those gauntlets from his comrades.

His black blade was solid and still usable, so he handed it down to Kuzaku, who performed a paladin ritual that involved carving a hexagram into the blade and marking it with blood as proof. By doing this, he could use the light magic

spell Saber to bestow Lumiaris's blessing upon the blade.

The party acquired a helm which was reminiscent of a hawk's head in the City of the Dead Ones, and Kuzaku's helmet just so happened to be getting really damaged at the time, so he swapped it out. Ranta named it the Hawk Helm, but Kuzaku really didn't like that.

Yume had made the curved sword that she'd picked up in the City of the Dead Ones, which was around the same length as her machete, one of her favorite weapons. Haruhiro kept calling it a wantou, which was the word for a curved blade, so Yume had decided to nickname it Wan-chan, which was a cute word for a puppy. Honestly, Haruhiro felt that was kind of wrong.

Merry's head staff broke, so she bought a staff with a hammer on the end from the blacksmith. That was probably because she had a lot more chances to participate in attacking now. She had clearly chosen her weapon with an eye towards its destructive power.

Though Shihoru hadn't changed her equipment, her elemental Dark was gradually getting stronger. The more attached to Shihoru Dark got, the bigger he seemed to grow, and also... the more cutesy his form became. On top of that, he could now produce effects similar to Sleepy Shadow, Shadow Complex, and Shadow Bond. He wasn't all-powerful, though, and Shihoru had to will just one of the impact, confusion, sleeping, or stopping effects into him, but he was still amazing.

According to Shihoru, she would eventually be able to mix and match different effects. If so, she'd be able to deal damage while stopping the enemy, or weaken them on top of dealing damage, along with a number of other possibilities. That was even more amazing.

Haruhiro ended up with a stiletto that was to be used exclusively for skewering attacks in his right hand, and a knife with a hilt guard for sweeping, slashing, and stabbing in his left hand. The former he had found in Herbesit's underground, while the latter he had looted off a dead one.

They hadn't seen Mr. Unjo. He was supposed to visit Well Village occasionally, but Haruhiro and the others tended to spend a lot of time away on expeditions, so they were probably just missing each other.

Every time they visited Herbesit, Rubicia's tower crossed Haruhiro's mind. He thought about going there someday, but never did.

One day, Ranta invited him to the grocery store in Well Village, where they drank a whole lot and got absolutely hammered. It wasn't just Haruhiro. Everyone drank as much as they could, and they had a great banquet with the blacksmith, the flattened egg with arms from the bag shop, the off-duty guards, and even the giant crab grocer. Ranta, Haruhiro, and Kuzaku took turns arm wrestling with the blacksmith and all lost badly, then the three of them took him on as a team and still lost. He had vague memories of all of this.

As his comrades got drunker and drunker, he recalled sitting next to Merry and they talked. What did they talk about? He felt like he'd had a good time, but he didn't remember a word of what they'd said.

Well, as long as he hadn't said anything weird. The next day, Merry was acting the same as ever, so it was probably fine.

It's fine, right? he tried to convince himself.

Ever since that one time, the receiver hadn't vibrated again. No one commented on it, but it was probably just a matter of bad timing.

That was probably all. That was what Haruhiro decided to think.

18. Before the Festival



“...Oh. Two hundred, huh,” Haruhiro said.

While infiltrating Waluandin, he realized this had been their 200th night since coming to Darunggar. Not that that mattered particularly. Obviously. Whether it was their 200th, their 300th, or even their 666th night, that made no difference to the denizens of this world.

Regardless, there was something strange about Waluandin tonight. Or rather, it was strange even in the outlying villages.

The village orcs had a tendency to go to bed early, and then wake up early. Earlier than the Waluandin orcs, or waluos for short. Haruhiro usually crept through their villages as they slept, then entered Waluandin through the workshop district when the blacksmith orcs had left. There were many places to hide in the workshop district, so even if there were waluos there, he could get past them easily enough.

However, tonight, the village orcs were up a little late. There was light leaking out from inside their igloo-like houses, and he heard the sound of orcs talking, too. He even spotted a handful of orcs outside doing something or another. He didn’t feel like it was a threat to his ability to Stealth his way past them, but it obviously bothered him.

In the workshop district of Waluandin, work had ended for the day, as usual, and it was quiet. However, everything past there was different.

Beyond the workshop district was a mixed residential district. There weren’t many people—no, many waluos—who walked the streets at night. That was the way it had been up until now, but this time, there were boisterous waluos here, there, and everywhere. Every house was lit up.

Some waluos were inside their houses, busily moving around, while others were outside talking. It probably wasn't just the residential area. All of Waluandin was filled with activity. It wasn't quite festive, but it felt almost like they were preparing for a festival or something.

There were a fair number of waluos loitering around, so it was dangerous. However, based on past experience, they didn't seem to be even remotely on guard against outsiders. There was a sort of coliseum-like place in the entertainment quarter, and they often bet on fights there. Haruhiro had witnessed some showy fights, and the waluos loved displays of martial ability, but this city had no defenses fit to be called defenses.

They had probably never even considered the possibility that an external enemy would attack. They would never have imagined humans like the party would be inside their city. As long as Haruhiro was careful, and didn't do anything to draw attention, he almost certainly wouldn't be spotted.

Being the coward that he was, Haruhiro felt afraid, but he still stayed calm and looked around the residential area. On their 200th night in Darunggar, Waluandin was definitely different. What was up with that? He wanted the details. Were they preparing for a festival? Why did it feel that way to Haruhiro? He went from alley to alley, occasionally moving over the rooftops as he observed them, and he gradually figured things out.

Because of the glowing lava that flowed nearby, the darkness of night never came to Waluandin. Even so, in this city which was even brighter than usual, the waluos seemed to be building something. Many things, in fact.

For instance, the windows of their houses generally had no shutters, so it was possible to see inside them when the lights were on, and he could see there were a ton of waluo women working at looms. What was the need to work the looms so late at night? They could just do it during the day. One thing was for sure, and that was that Haruhiro had never seen these waluo women weaving late at night before.

There were a good number of the waluo men decorating the front of their houses with sticks, too. They were chatting with their neighbors, and eating while they did it, but they probably weren't just doing it for fun. He'd never

seen waluos do this before.

Haruhiro had no clue what those sticks were supposed to be, but there had to be a reason for them. Right now, they had to make them, and that was why they were doing so.

The waluo children were gathered around messing with something that looked like a cage. The older waluos were giving directions to the waluo boys, and they were having them help with the work.

Preparations. It was clear the waluos were preparing for something. They were all producing costumes and decorations, and then they'd put them on, use them, and do something or another. It had to be a city-wide event. A ritual? A festival? An attraction? Whatever it was, Waluandin was enveloped in an atmosphere that was detached from their usual daily routines.

The center of Waluandin was dominated by one particularly large building that resembled a crouching dragon. It wasn't clear if the waluos had a king or not, but Haruhiro had taken to calling it the palace for convenience's sake.

The palace was surrounded by wide streets and a number of thin rivers of lava, with one main road that stretched out towards Fire Dragon Mountain. Also, there were a lot of impressive buildings surrounding the palace, and there were always a lot of waluos going in and out, both during the day and the evening. Besides, there were armed waluos patrolling this area even late at night. That being the case, it was kind of a hard area to approach, but tonight he decided to work up the courage to try and slip inside.

It was a calculated risk, of course. Being no exception to the general rule tonight, the waluos of the palace district were hard at work preparing something. This was a district where the waluos often seemed to be out enjoying a nighttime stroll, but it was different now. Most waluos were absorbed in their work, so if Haruhiro used Stealth well, he wouldn't be found that easily.

But... he couldn't help but think.

They really led cultured lives here in Waluandin. Compared to this place, Well Village was the sticks, and Herbesit was lawless and far too barbaric. Here, there was order. The waluos didn't rob one another for the most part. They

worked together on various things as they earned their keep, and lived their lives. They didn't just eat, work, and sleep. They had leisure, too. It was a highly stratified society, but it afforded half... no, most of the waluos with a safer, and possibly more prosperous life than Haruhiro and the party had.

"An altar...?" he murmured to himself.

Up on the roof of one building that faced onto the plaza in front of the palace, Haruhiro made an effort to let the excess tension out of his body. It was the first time he'd come this far. However, he had seen the plaza from a distance before. That thing hadn't been there before.

It was a stage that had to be around two meters square, and three meters high. There was another platform on top of it, and on that platform—there was a cage. It was a cage... probably. Just gilded, decorated, and really gaudy. Normally, cages were used for holding criminals or prisoners, but it didn't look like that was what that one was for.

The plump waluo woman in the cage didn't look like a prisoner. The cloth wrapped around her head and breasts and the skirt she wore around her hips were standard waluo women's fashion, but all of her clothes were clearly high quality. They were embroidered with vibrant patterns, and they sparkled. It looked like there were gemstones woven into them. It made it so that even her green skin seemed glossy, as if it were shining. And was she wearing makeup?

From the way the waluo woman who may well have been of high-class was acting, it didn't seem like she was a prisoner. She was calm, even dignified.

Besides, though she was in the cage, she wasn't alone. Many waluos came up onto the stage, one after another, to greet her. They would speak to each other through the bars of the cage, and sometimes hold her hand, so maybe they were acquaintances of hers. But the woman was clearly better dressed than any of them.

Haruhiro took a closer look at the gilded cage. The decorations on the four corners were—dragons? There were dragon-based decorations scattered around the rest of the altar, too. That was also true of that waluo woman's clothing. The pattern embroidered on her skirt was a dragon, wasn't it? On top of her cloth-wrapped head, she was wearing something like a crown. That was

dragon-y, too.

Hadn't the decorations that the waluos men in the residential area had been putting sticks on been the same way? Dragons. They were dragons. Now that he thought about it, the palace resembled a dragon, too. Why hadn't he noticed before? Waluandin was overflowing with dragon-based designs. There were dragons everywhere.

Haruhiro turned his eyes towards Fire Dragon Mountain, which looked ready to erupt at any moment. Like its name suggested, there was at least one dragon there. The fire dragon.

The waluos had built their city and lived at the foot of that mountain. The fire dragon ate salamanders, and Mr. Unjo said it had eaten his comrades, too. Could it be that orcs just didn't taste good to it? That was hard to imagine. The fire dragon had to be a dangerous creature. Haruhiro didn't know why, but for some reason, the waluos were living right next to that creature. Would it be too much to say they were prospering, as well?

The waluos might be worshiping the dreadful fire dragon. The fire dragon might be like a god to them. Or rather, it might be a god.

Right now, they were filling the city with dragons in preparation for something. It might be some sort of festival with a ritual involved. Then what was the woman in the cage?

"No, she couldn't be a sacrifice... could she?" Haruhiro murmured.

The waluos kept coming to visit the woman in the cage. It looked like maybe they were saying their goodbyes. There was no air of tragedy to it, so maybe it was an honor to become a sacrifice. No, well, it wasn't decided that she was a sacrifice yet, and there wasn't definitive proof that they worshiped the fire dragon, either. Was Haruhiro's imagination getting the better of him...?

He couldn't help but think there was lots of room for thinking about different possibilities, but if he speculated too much while he was scouting, he was bound to make a careless mistake. He was going to have to leave when the night ended anyhow. This was a good time to pull out, so he did.

For his return, he left through the workshop district like he had decided in

advance. On the way back, he repeated, *Going in is easy, but returning is scary*, in his mind. It was easy to grow hasty on the return trip, and to let his guard down as a result. It was better for him to remain overcautious.

When he crossed into the workshop district, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Haruhiro hurriedly fled inside a nearby workshop. He'd sensed something, though he couldn't be sure what. Should he hide here and see what was up?

No... he decided to move.

Haruhiro kept his posture low and walked while keeping up his Stealth. He couldn't hear his own footsteps, the rustling of his clothes, or even his breath. It was as if Haruhiro wasn't there. Was anyone other than him moving? He didn't see them. Had he imagined it? Not necessarily.

He was managing to focus. There was no issue with the way he was walking.

He sensed something.

Is there someone, something, out there? Am I being watched?

Well, who cares, he decided.

If they were just watching, let them watch. If they were gonna come, let them come. If they got any closer, he was pretty sure he'd know. He'd be able to react. He had trained a lot during his solitary investigations on these expeditions. It wasn't just for show.

Don't get conceited, he immediately warned himself. *Don't get carried away. Don't think that you're doing well. Think that you've got to try harder. Always give it your all.*

Haruhiro was already convinced. There was something out there, and it was watching Haruhiro. Following him from a distance. He could only call it a presence at this point, but he felt it. It was there constantly.

Not only that, there was more than one of them. Usually behind him, sometimes to the right, or to the left, there was a presence. The presence right behind him was unchanging. It was watching Haruhiro from a fixed distance. The other presence would close in, then move away. It vanished sometimes,

too, but always eventually came back.

It wasn't like he wasn't disturbed by this. He was scared, too. However, they hadn't attacked him yet. Nothing good would come from giving in to fear at this stage. He understood that, so he was keeping himself under control.

He leapt over the lava river from inside the warehouse district, leaving Waluandin behind. He stopped for a bit, then turned back.

The presences had vanished. Were they gone? No, he couldn't be sure yet. Haruhiro had stopped, so they had, too. Because of that, it had become harder for Haruhiro to detect them. That might be all. It was too early to feel relieved.

The villages had finally gone to sleep at this point, so he took a risk and dashed through them.

Who were his pursuers? Waluos? That was highly likely. Humans had thieves like Haruhiro, so it wouldn't be that strange for there to be orcs that specialized in sneaky stuff, too. Had a pair of thief-y waluos detected an intruder, Haruhiro, in Waluandin and so decided to tail him to discern his identity and motives? Well, it was probably something like that.

This was embarrassing. He had been worried before, when they'd killed the waluo hunters, but fortunately that had never gotten traced back to them. But if the waluos became aware of Haruhiro's existence, they might become more cautious. If they put proper security in place, he wouldn't be able to go in and out of Waluandin the way he had been up until now.

It was best to assume that, if they set their minds to it, the waluos could prepare themselves to deal with enemies from outside. This was true of the orcs back in Grimgar as well, but the orcs of Waluandin were roughly as intelligent as humans. Though they were different, and there were a lot of things each side couldn't accept about the other, it couldn't be said that either side was superior or inferior. In Grimgar, the humans had been defeated by the Alliance of Kings, which included orcs, and had been forced to withdraw to south of the Tenryu Mountains for a time. For humans, orcs were an enemy that were more than equal to them.

He did his best not to enter the villages' fields. It was hard to call the footing there good, so it was sure to lower his speed. That would make it hard to

respond quickly. He moved quickly down the thin paths that had been created between the fields.

On the way, he felt the presences again. As expected. They had no intention of letting Haruhiro go, it seemed.

He hadn't come up with all the details yet, but he had a general plan he'd decided on. First, he'd probe the presences while getting out of the villages as quickly as he could manage. If they attacked him, he'd have to flee immediately. Could he get away? There were too many unknown elements, honestly, and he couldn't be sure until he tried it, but if it came down to it, he'd have to.

Ohh, this is scary.

He caught sight of moving shadows twice. He stopped sensing their presences once he entered the twisting path through the rift, but it was best not to assume they'd given up. It was incredibly difficult to keep a level head in this situation. Yeah, it wasn't going to happen.

Still, somehow, he was managing to keep himself from panicking. That was pretty good, right? He wanted to praise himself for it. Well, no, not really. He wasn't safe yet. He should wait before secretly singing his own praises.

He came out of the rift and into the flat lands. He was almost back to the meetup point at the Hot Spring River.

The night wasn't over. His comrades were probably asleep with one of them standing guard. If it had been daytime, they would be out hunting gujis, or perhaps heading out to Alluja. Those would both have made regrouping difficult, so maybe it was best to think of this as good luck within bad luck.

Was it?

My stomach hurts, Haruhiro thought. Nothing new there. Maybe I'm going to develop an ulcer? If I do, I guess we could just treat it with light magic. Does it work on internal diseases like that? I dunno. I'll have to ask Merry when I get the chance.

He was thinking about stuff that didn't matter. That was proof that his concentration was breaking.

Haruhiro reapplied himself to the task at hand. He could see the spot where the others were waiting.

Who was standing guard? Shihoru, it seemed. Everyone else was lying down. Shihoru was the only one sitting.

Not good.

Haruhiro broke into a cold sweat, and he felt an unpleasant feeling rising up in his chest. Had he screwed up?

He'd practically led his pursuers back to his comrades. That might have been their aim all along. They'd discovered a suspicious individual, Haruhiro, but they'd been sure he wasn't alone, and that others had to be out there somewhere. So, in order to catch them all in one fell swoop, or to slaughter them all, they'd tailed Haruhiro. That was why they had deliberately chosen not to attack him.

They had been letting him swim, so to speak. Now the enemy might leave Haruhiro for later and ambush all of his comrades other than Shihoru as they were sleeping.

What should he do in that case? What was he going to do? There was no time for indecision. Haruhiro dashed forward.

"Shihoru! Wake everyone! Run away!"

"Huh... Haruhiro-kun?! Ah!" In great haste, Shihoru whacked Ranta in the head with her staff. "G-Get up...!"

"Ngahh?!" Ranta jumped up. "Wh-Wh-What?! What're you doing?!"

"...Whuh?" Yume rubbed her eyes as she sat up.

"Gah?!" Kuzaku shouted as he quickly got up.

"I'm gett—" Merry tried to run as soon as she woke up, but tripped. "—Wah!"

Oh, man, Haruhiro thought frantically. That made my heart race. No, now's not the time to be smitten with her. Honestly, I've got bigger concerns. I mean it. I might have bigger concerns.

Haruhiro looked in every direction, running as he shouted, "We've probably

got enemies! Run! Don't split up!"

"Yoink!" Yume pulled Merry to her feet, then shouldered her pack.

Merry said, "Thanks," and picked up her own things. Shihoru was already getting out of there.

Kuzaku took the lead, while Ranta drew Riper.

"Enemies?! Where? I'll take them—" Ranta began.

Before Haruhiro could shout anything—

"Hold it!" he heard a familiar voice say.

"No..." Haruhiro came to a stop so sudden he nearly pitched over, then turned towards the voice.

Wait, what's a no? What's no? She's not a no, she's, uh, what was she again? Basically...

It came from behind him, to the right. The woman who came out of the darkness was wearing a dark cloak and a wide-brimmed hat. For some reason she immediately threw off her coat and hat, revealing herself to be—no matter where, or how you looked at her—a dominatrix.

Why did she have to accentuate her female parts, expertly exposing everything but the bits she really shouldn't let them see? When she stuck her chest out, it was hard to look away.

She isn't a No, she's a La.

"...Lala-san?" Haruhiro said slowly.

"Long time no see," Lala said with an amorous smile, licking her lips. "I'm surprised to see you alive."

"The ones who tailed me here from Waluandin... that was you and Nono-san?"

"Well, yes," said Lala. "Though I hadn't expected you to notice. —Nono!"

The man appeared from the direction of the rifts. He was white-haired, with a black mask covering the lower half of his face.

Nono came up next to Lala and got down on all fours. Lala sat down on Nono's back and crossed her legs.

"So? What were you up to in the orcish city, right before the Fire Dragon Festival?"

"Festyfull...?" Yume cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"H-Hold on!" Ranta had nearly returned his sword to its sheathe, but he readied it again. "Haruhiro, they're the enemies you meant, right?! Just because they're human, and we know them, that doesn't mean they're on our side! These guys abandoned us once before!"

"Abandoned you?" Lala snorted. "Did we do that?"

"Y-Y-Yeah! You left us behind and took off on your own, didn't you?! I haven't forgotten!"

"That wasn't our intention, but even if it was, why bring that back up now? You're such a tight-ass. I can't even work up the motivation to train you and expand it."

"E-Expand it..." Shihoru stuttered.

Um, Shihoru, Haruhiro thought. Why was she, of all people, the one to react to that?

"Shut up!" Ranta was whining. "Listen, we've had a real hard time since then! We've been through a lot! We didn't know left from right, and it was really tough!"

"It was the same for us," said Lala.

"S-Still! I do understand what you're saying, but still!"

"...Ranta-kun," Kuzaku whispered to him. "Politely. You're talking to her politely."

"You're imagining it, moron! Dumbass! You're too big for your own good, damn it!"

Merry was looking at Haruhiro. *What do we do now?* her expression asked.

Haruhiro rubbed his lower back, subtly placing a finger on the hilt of his

stiletto. “I don’t really think you abandoned us. No, not just me... none of us do. Except for the idiot. It’s probably some kind of sign that we met up again like this. I’d like to trade information.”

Of course, if for some reason Lala and Nono tried to harm Haruhiro and the party, or intended to use them, he wouldn’t stop there.

“We feel the same way, of course.” Lala narrowed her eyes, touching her own lips playfully. “You’re a strange one. Haruhiro, was it? You’ve got a good face.”

“I get told I have sleepy eyes, though.” Haruhiro had to work to keep his expression from changing. *She totally sees right through me.* “So, what’s this about a Fire Dragon Festival?”

“You saw them preparing for it, didn’t you?” Lala asked. “We don’t know how often yet, but they do it relatively frequently. It’s a big ritual where they offer a sacrifice to the fire dragon. The whole city celebrates. By the way, the Fire Dragon Festival is just our name for it. It’s too bad, really? It looks like we can’t make friends with the orcs.”

“Sacrifices and rituals, you say...?” Ranta sheathed his sword and knelt down. It looked like he was getting ready in advance in case he had to kowtow. What was with that guy?

“...So, uh... basically they’re, you know,” Haruhiro said. “They’re offering the sacrifice to the fire dragon? Seriously?”

“...That’s what she said,” Shihoru said in a low voice filled with revulsion.

You can say that again, thought Haruhiro.

So was that really it? The Fire Dragon Festival. The sacrifice. The streets packed with revelers.

Maybe, just maybe, could this be it? Could it be what, exactly?

Could it be their chance... maybe? Their chance at what?

That was obvious. If they took this opportunity, it might be possible. The thought occurred to him. He’d gone and thought it now.

Everyone could charge through Waluandin and reach Fire Dragon Mountain, maybe. They’d search for the cave, then maybe they could return through it.

“Looks like you’ve got some useful information.” Lala put on a sensuous smile and motioned for Haruhiro to come closer with one finger. “Tell Lala-sama everything. You might just get a lovely reward for it, you know?”

19. Over the Rainbow



The orcs all had decorative cloth tied over a shoulder and wore red and black body paint. The men and the women, the young and the old.

There were orcs beating on drums. There were orcs playing stringed instruments. There were orcs blowing on flutes. The orcs, children included, clapped their hands, stamped their feet, and sang in unison.

The orcs carrying sticks with dragon designs on them weren't singing, they were saying something in loud voices instead. The way they spoke in time with the rhythm, working in hand and body gestures, made it look like they were giving a speech, or directing the instrument players and singers.

They were wonderfully lively, and though it felt like it could all fall apart at any moment, they were unified. They may have been wild, but they were by no means crude. If anything, it was highly refined. Beautiful, even. It was overwhelming to listen to.

No, Haruhiro thought, shaking his head in the shadow of a giant caterpillar enclosure's fence. Don't listen to them. Sure, they're incredible. I know it's worth hearing, too. It feels like something I have to listen to, but I can't. This isn't the time to be falling in love with a song.

Haruhiro poked his head out from behind the fence to get another look at the orcs celebrating in the central plaza of their village. It was actually still noon, but the adult orcs already had the alcohol flowing, and the children were worked up, too. Besides, he was more than twenty meters from the plaza here. Even during the day, they wouldn't be able to see him this far away. There was no way they would spot him.

Haruhiro waved his hand, motioning to Ranta and the others in the rear. Then he gave the signal for Lala and Nono. There was a bit of an incident where Yume

whacked Ranta, who had been staring off into the distance, in the head, and then when he tried to complain, Merry clubbed him with the pole of her hammer staff. But everyone kept low and came this way.

In Kuzaku's case, his armor clinked pretty loudly as he moved. But the noise of the festival covered it up, which made this a good arrangement.

Haruhiro nodded, then moved on to the next point. He confirmed it was safe, then called over his comrades plus Lala and Nono. It was boring and repetitive work, so he was a little surprised that not just his comrades, other than Ranta (that piece of trash), but Lala and Nono also did as he instructed without saying a word. There was no telling when they would turn on him, though.

Lala had a pocket watch, so they could tell time with relative precision. This raucous festival had begun three hours after the flameset. Haruhiro and the others had entered the village area one hour later, then spent an hour and a half on making their way to Waluandin.

Incidentally, according to Lala-sama, the time from sunrise, or flamerise rather, to sunset, or flameset, was roughly ten to fifteen hours, and the time from flameset to flamerise was also roughly ten to fifteen hours. There was variation in the length of the day and night, but if you added them together, they were around twenty-five hours, so that meant a day in Darunggar was one hour longer than a day in Grimgar.

Regardless, in another hour and a half, they would be out of the village area... or so he was thinking when another incident occurred.

Oh, crap, thought Haruhiro, *It's a dragon.*

The dragon was coming this way from Waluandin!

To be more precise, the dragon was—a model... huh...

It was over three meters high, and more than ten meters long. It was pretty huge. It was painted red and black like the orcs' bodies, and its two eye sockets were filled with sparkling yellow gems, or something similar. Its neck, jaw, body, tail, and four limbs were all movable, and more than thirty orcs covered in black costumes were carrying it, as well as manipulating it with sticks.

When the portable dragon came, the village orcs got super excited. That was

probably another part of the Fire Dragon Festival. There was singing and playing of instruments, the speaking of the ones holding the dragon sticks grew louder, and the orc children ran away in fear. The portable dragon chased them around, and some of the children were crying and wailing. The women who were presumably the mother orcs laughed as they soothed their children.

Ranta was clearly itching to join the festivities, but obviously that was out of the question. Haruhiro moved on towards Waluandin. If things were this lively, there was no way they'd be discovered. That was their aim, and the reason they had waited for the Fire Dragon Festival to start.

The village area was noisy pretty much wherever they went, but the noise was also concentrated in certain places. All the farmer orcs from throughout the villages were gathered in a number of plaza areas with their families. They sang, played instruments, enjoyed the portable dragon when it was brought to them, and got totally heated up. Everywhere else was deserted, and there wasn't a person or orc in sight. Even so, Haruhiro didn't relax. He made sure not to rush, always taking the proper steps before moving forward, and was so thorough about doing so that even he got exasperated with himself.

Waluandin was boiling over with festive spirit. However, it seemed to be a holiday, so there was no sign of waluos in the workshop district or the mine. The blacksmiths' workshops had warehouses here and there, too. He found one that was not too big and not too small, used Picking on the lock, and decided to use it as a spot to lay low temporarily.

Ranta, Shihoru, Yume, Merry, Kuzaku, and Lala went on standby. When Haruhiro and Nono split up to do some scouting, they found the situation in Waluandin was roughly the same as in the village area. The waluos were concentrated on the main streets, singing, performing, dancing, and making a ruckus. Every waluo wore decorative cloth and body paint, and one in every twenty to thirty carried one of those dragon sticks and was in full festive attire. There was food and drink laid out everywhere, and the waluos seemed free to take any of it.

Haruhiro headed back to where his comrades were hiding, masking his footsteps and walking down the back alleyways of the residential district. There were no people, no orcs, no anyone to be seen. Every house was empty. That

said, there could still be waluos who were at home for some reason. He couldn't let his guard down. Haruhiro made sure he was on task as he entered the alley.

He gulped.

There was a waluo who was clearly very young and still thin crouching there. The waluo was holding his head with both hands. He wore body paint, but he had taken off his cloth, and it was in a tangled mess at his feet.

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do? Haruhiro asked himself that question more than ten times in the span of a second. He found his answer. Haruhiro decided to turn back quietly. That was the precise moment the orc looked in his direction.

The waluo inhaled sharply, and tried to scream. Haruhiro's body moved on its own, and he jumped on the orc. He pushed him to the ground and strangled him.

If he did it while standing, it was possible that he might have dangerously struck his head or some other part of his body on the wall or ground as the waluo struggled and thrashed around. If he pinned him first, well, he was more or less sure to be safe. Haruhiro's right arm was tightly wrapped around the waluo's neck. He was bracing that right arm with his left, so it wasn't going to be easy to break free.

The waluo tried to scratch at Haruhiro's face with both hands, but he managed to defend himself somehow.

I can do this, Haruhiro told himself. *It looks like this will work. Okay. ...He's out.*

The waluo had passed out with his fangs bared. The strength had fully drained from his body. There was no mistaking it. This wasn't an act; he was really out cold.

Haruhiro rolled him over and then got up. He was about to leave, but then...

No, no, no... Haruhiro shook his head. *Isn't this bad? I mean, sure, he's unconscious. He'll probably be out for a while. But I can't just leave him like this, right? I have to do something. Something? Make it so he can't move? Tie him*

up? Or... make it so he never wakes back up? Like, snuff him?

“...Damn it.” Haruhiro pressed his palm to his forehead.

I don't know what to do. I'm torn. I'm hesitating. This young waluo was all alone. Even though it's the middle of the Fire Dragon Festival. Why was he all alone in a place like this? Was he bad with groups? A loner? Maybe he was being bullied? That could be why. None of it matters. He saw me. It'd be dangerous to let him live. I'll kill him. Just a quick stab. Time to do it.

With that done, Haruhiro left the alley and hurried back towards their hiding place.

Don't let it shake me up. Stealth, Stealth. Concentrate. If it happened once, it can happen again. I might encounter another waluo. It's fine. I handled that appropriately. It's fine. No problem. Good grief. Things like that can happen. Man, he surprised me. I've gotta be more careful. Of course. I'll be careful, okay? I'm gonna be real damn careful. Obviously. That goes without saying. Geez...

Haruhiro turned and looked back. Nono was there. Standing like a corpse. No, corpses don't stand. Haruhiro was often told he had sleepy eyes, but Nono had the eyes of a dead man. Was he looking at Haruhiro, or wasn't he? There was no way to tell.

Haruhiro bowed to him, and raised one hand a little. “...Hey there.”

Nono's head twisted to the right, and then slowly back to the left. His expression didn't change. Or rather, because of the mask, Haruhiro couldn't read it at all.

Um, you're kinda scary...?

“Erm... You wanna go... back?” When Haruhiro hesitantly pointed to the hiding place, Nono nodded. He knew the man didn't talk, but Haruhiro couldn't help but think, *Say something!* Maybe the harness-like mask prevented him from speaking, though.

It was strangely tense returning with Nono. When had Nono gotten behind him? Had Haruhiro turned because he'd noticed Nono's presence then? Or was it just because he'd vaguely felt like it? He couldn't be sure.

They finally reached their warehouse hideout. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. When they entered the warehouse, Ranta, who was sitting in the corner, jumped up and said, “Hey!”

That was when it happened.

Nono suddenly grabbed him by the neck.

It was a surprise, and he hadn’t seen it coming, so he couldn’t dodge. Even if he had been ready for it, he wasn’t sure he could have avoided it.

Nono pressed his masked mouth up close to Haruhiro’s ear. His voice was muffled, of course. It was like a groan. It was really hard to make out what he was saying, but for some reason Haruhiro knew very clearly what he meant.

When Haruhiro responded, “...Got it,” Nono let him go.

Nono walked over to Lala and immediately got down on all fours. He’d just gotten back, but he was already a chair again now. Lala gave him no words of gratitude. Instead she mercilessly sat on Nono’s back, as if that were a perfectly normal thing to do, and crossed her legs. She seemed satisfied.

Haruhiro walked over to Ranta and the others, dragging his feet like a corpse.

“Wh-What was that... about?” Shihoru asked worriedly.

“...Nah.” Haruhiro shook his head. “It’s nothing, really.”

“He say something to you?” Ranta indicated Nono with a glance. “...Hold on, can that guy even talk? Well... I guess he must be able to.”

“Don’t call him ‘that guy,’” Haruhiro corrected the piece of trash without much strength. “It’s Nono-san, okay?”

“S-Sure,” Ranta said. “Hold on, pal, are you okay? You’re acting weird, you know? Did something happen?”



“Ha ha... If even you’re worried about me, I’m probably done for...”

“You’re one rude guy, you know that?” Ranta snapped. “I may not look it, but I’m full of love, okay? I’m the Dread Knight of Love, got it?”

“You love Haruhiro?” Merry asked, sounding annoyed.

“Y-Y-You moron, of course not! That’s not what I’m saying!”

“It’s not just any love, it’s romantic love, huh?” Yume snickered.

“I don’t love him, romantically or otherwise, damn it! That’s obvious, you moron! Damn it!”

Kuzaku let out a short laugh. “When you’re so desperate to deny it, that actually makes me more suspicious.”

“I’ll make mincemeat out of you, Kuzacky! Seriously, seriously! Don’t make light of a dread knight!”

“Hey,” Lala-sama spoke up. “You, the monkey over there. You’re annoying. Be quiet.”

Ranta immediately stood up ramrod straight and saluted her. His mouth moved, but no voice came out. *Sir, yes, sir!* It looked like, at some point, he’d been fully trained by Lala.

Terrifying.

Honestly, she was terrifying. Haruhiro shuddered. It wasn’t just Lala-sama. Nono was, too. What he’d done a moment ago, that was crazy scary. This was what Nono had said to Haruhiro:

“If Lala-sama gets so much as a scratch because of you people, I’ll kill every last one of you.”

That was it.

It probably wasn’t an idle threat. Nono had been serious. Besides, the guy didn’t look normal. And he was hyper competent. If Nono decided to kill them all, he could probably do it without them managing to move so much as an eyebrow to defend themselves.

The question was, why had Nono chosen that precise moment to tell

Haruhiro? It wasn't like no ideas came to mind, but he didn't want to think about it. It wasn't a thing Haruhiro could do anything by thinking about anyway. He decided to forget the matter for now. There were other things that needed thinking about. Lots and lots of them.

Haruhiro and the others left the warehouse. They came out of the workshop district, and passed through the residential area beyond it. Haruhiro led the way, checking that everything was safe before calling everyone over, the same as before. They were avoiding the festival areas, so there were few people—no, few waluos—passing by, but he had to be careful of stray ones. Even if he thought there were none, nothing was absolute. Though, that said, if he was too timid, they couldn't move at all. If they were found, or if they found a waluo, they just had to deal with it immediately. He had to accept it. Nothing was perfect.

—*Right?*

His stomach hurt. He was sweating like crazy. His throat was dry. The road coming up next was kind of a big one. But when he'd scouted it earlier, it'd seemed like they could cross it.

He poked his head out just a little. No waluos. He gave the signal, then crossed the road first. His comrades, along with Lala and Nono, followed Haruhiro.

They were still in the residential area, but the slope suddenly got steeper here. It was a pretty steep uphill climb. It was hard to see up from the bottom, but there was a good view from above. He had to skillfully hide himself as he advanced.

His stomach really hurt. He was aging a year for every second that went by. He couldn't help but feel that way.

Instead of heading straight toward Fire Dragon Mountain, he chose side streets as much as possible. No matter what kind of road it was, he made sure to check it thoroughly before entering. Even that wasn't perfect. He had to be sure that, no matter what happened, he didn't lose his head.

He was straining himself too much. Pushing his whole body.

Don't force it, he told himself. Stay calm, stay calm.

No, he couldn't do it. His heart felt like it was ready to break into a thousand pieces. He was just barely holding himself together. With guts, or stubbornness, or something like that, probably. That was the condition he was in, but Haruhiro probably had sleepy eyes and looked like he was just disinterestedly doing his job. He didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Either way, he wasn't at his limit yet.

I can manage somehow.

Since that last time, he hadn't even seen a waluo. Maybe they were going to be able to make it through Waluandin just like this? Whenever he thought it would be easy, something bad happened. Well, his harsher predictions tended to come true, too, so maybe it would all be the same no matter which way he leaned.

"The sound of the drums... Isn't it kind of close?" Ranta commented.

Even before Ranta said it, Haruhiro had noticed. If even Ranta had noticed it, Lala and Nono had to be aware well ahead of him, too. Yet they'd said nothing.

Once again, Haruhiro was reminded that he couldn't trust them. He didn't know if they were evil or not, but Lala and Nono only ever thought about themselves. They were only accompanying Haruhiro and the others because, at the moment, they had decided it was worth using them. If that changed, they would probably abandon the party without hesitation. Using them as sacrificial pawns, if need be. They wouldn't even feel guilty about doing it.

That said, Haruhiro and his comrades were working with them because it was beneficial to them, too. So, in that sense, they were even. Well, as for whether or not he could abandon Lala and Nono if he had to, that was another matter, or rather he'd probably have a hard time bringing himself to do it. Was he being... naïve, maybe? He might be.

Haruhiro had the other seven wait while he clambered up on top of a nearby building. When he got a look from the rooftop, he could see columns of lights that he assumed were torches moving around Waluandin. One column was less than a hundred meters away. That was pretty close, all things considered.

What do we do?

Haruhiro came down off the roof. How should he explain it? His head wasn't working right.

When he just stood there, Ranta rounded on him. "What're you staring off into space for?! What's up, man?! What's going on?! Haruhiro! I'm asking you a question, so say something, you balding idiot!"

"...We may be in trouble."

"In trouble how?!"

"They may be searching... for us."

"Searching for—us... Wait, whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

"Ranta's been talkin' real loud for a while now, after all," Yume said.

"Shut it, Tiny Tits! Just shut up! We're having an important conversation here!"

"Why would they be looking for us?" Shihoru asked.

It was a perfectly reasonable question. From his comrades' perspective, it must have been a mystery. However, it wasn't any mystery to Haruhiro. It wasn't. In fact, he had it more or less figured out. He didn't want it to be true, but he had to assume it probably was.

"First, we need to run," Merry said as if trying to convince herself, then looked at her comrades. "Whatever the cause or the reason is, it can wait."

"Sounds about right." Kuzaku nodded. "We should run before we're found."

"Where're we gonna run to?!" Ranta shouted. "We're pretty deep inside Waluandin, you know?! You think there's anywhere for us to run here?!"

"No need to run." Lala licked her red lips, then pointed to Fire Dragon Mountain. "For the orcs of Waluandin, Fire Dragon Mountain is probably sacred land. They wouldn't chase us there, would they?"

Nono fixed a contemptuous look on Haruhiro.

...S-Scary, Haruhiro thought. That look, he's totally pissed. They're on to me, damn it.

At the very least, Nono knew. Knew who it was who'd brought about this state of affairs.

Yes. That was right. It was Haruhiro's fault. Probably. Well, almost certainly. Haruhiro would have given eight to nine out of ten odds that he was to blame.

He hadn't killed the orc. He hadn't been able to do it. Not that young waluo. He'd bound him hand and foot, gagged him, and then left him there.

Do I have to tell them? Haruhiro wondered. But they were short on time, right? Maybe not now? Still, why didn't Nono condemn him for it? No matter how Haruhiro looked at it, this was a crisis. Lala was in danger, too. So why? Because Nono didn't want to talk? He'd rather kill him first and lay blame later? He was looking for the opportunity? Whatever it was, they needed to hurry.

Merry was right. When it came to the cause or the reason for it, that could wait.

"Let's go! To Fire Dragon Mountain!" Haruhiro directed.

The waluos beat their drums, swung their torches, and shouted as they searched for Haruhiro and the others. Even at a rough count, there were a lot of torches. Easily into the triple digits. What was more, they weren't all necessarily carrying torches. It could be one in every few, every ten, or even less than that.

It would be best to assume there were roughly ten times as many in the search party as there were torches. It was over a thousand, and there were possibly multiple thousands of waluos out there hunting for Haruhiro and the others.

Haruhiro did what he could to try to lead the group, but Nono went on ahead of him. He'd have to follow. He couldn't say, *Leave this to me*. If Haruhiro said that, Nono would probably have killed him. Besides, he felt like he'd probably mess up again.

It was best to put what happened with the young waluo out of his mind for now. He knew that, but he couldn't just forget it. Honestly, Haruhiro couldn't have any confidence in his decision-making ability right now. Right now? Only now? What about in future? Was he ever going to be able to say, *Okay, I'm good now?* He couldn't see it happening.

Nono advanced smoothly, sometimes going straight without hesitation, sometimes turning, and sometimes heading down alleyways. How could he keep on going without hesitation like that? Every once in a while, Lala would call out to him from the rear, saying, *Right*, or *Left*, or *Straight*. Was it thanks to Lala? If he was going to do the wrong thing, Lala would correct him. Was it because even if he messed up, Lala was there to cover for him? Was it the trust between them? Because he wasn't alone? Because they were a pair? What about Haruhiro? Did he believe in his comrades? It wasn't that he didn't believe in them, it was just... that—

“Stop!” Lala shouted, and he realized a band of waluos had appeared in front of them.

The waluos were over two meters tall and wearing body paint, so they were frightening even to look at. Haruhiro's heart jumped up and down, causing a sharp and intense pain to run through his chest.

Nono attacked the lead waluo. Kuzaku readied his shield and charged in. Ranta followed.

Nono used his right hand knife to cut open the first waluo's neck in the blink of an eye, then sprang at another waluo. Kuzaku smashed into one with his shield, probably meaning to knock him down, but the enemy was bigger than he was and managed to hold firm. Ranta slashed at the waluo carrying the torch, but though he'd managed to drive him back, he hadn't dealt a serious wound.

Haruhiro grabbed the hilt of his stiletto, adjusted his grip, and then held it tight.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap. This was not good. No. He was standing bolt upright, his legs like sticks.

What was he doing? Nothing. Haruhiro was doing nothing.

He looked around. Looked, and thought. He pretended to be thinking. The truth was, he wasn't thinking a thing.

“This way!” Lala shouted.

The moment he heard Lala shout that, he was incredibly relieved. She was

pointing to an alley a little way back the way they had come.

He sent Yume, Shihoru, and Merry on ahead, then waited for Ranta, who had turned and run, and Kuzaku, who was slowly pulling back while using his shield to block a waluo's kicks. Nono wasn't just fast, he used martial arts techniques of varying speed along with his knife to great effect, and he was stalling the waluos. He wasn't that big, and all he had was a short knife, but he was running circles around the big waluos. How could he pull a trick like that off?

Now wasn't the time to stare in admiration.

Ranta went into the alley. Kuzaku wasn't there yet. There was a waluo harassing him.

I've got to do something about him, thought Haruhiro. That's right. I've got to. I need to do at least that much. Do it.

Haruhiro raced past Kuzaku and the waluo, then made a sudden turn and slammed a Backstab into him. He'd been aiming to hit the kidney by going through his back, but it didn't reach the organ.

The waluo turned.

Kuzaku hit it in the jaw with Bash, then followed up with a Thrust using his black blade. There was no need for either of them to say, *Let's go*. They headed for the alley together. Nono followed them, too.

To the alley.

To the alley.

It was a narrow alley, maybe only about a meter across, and Lala was there, elegantly pointing to the right. Why hadn't Lala abandoned Haruhiro and the party yet? What was Nono thinking?

No. That didn't matter. Not for now. He'd shut up and do as Lala said. It was his only choice. That was the best thing to do. After all, Haruhiro couldn't handle it himself. He had no plan for getting out of this. He could only run around blindly.

Lala was different. She showed no signs of panicking. Nono was the same way. They were calm. Like always.

I've gotta be like that, thought Haruhiro. He wanted to be like them, but could he? Well, that was questionable. Probably not. There was no way. He could work his whole life, and he'd never be able to be like Lala and Nono.

When they came out onto a large cobblestone road, they had a good view of Waluandin in its entirety. They were at a pretty high elevation. This was already the far edge of Waluandin. The waluos pressed in on them from the far end of the road.

"Aha!" Lala laughed. "Slowpokes! We've won!"

Had they really? Was she lying? Lala took the lead in racing up the big road up the hill.

Ranta shouted, "This is so damn cool!"

The waluos had totally caught Haruhiro and the others now. This big road seemed to stretch from the palace district, meandering a bit as it went all the way to Fire Dragon Mountain. How did he know that? Because he could see it. The torches clearly lit up the path of the road.

Incredible. There was a seriously incredible number of waluos.

If Kikkawa had been here, he might have called it "tally-to some-awe." Yeah, maybe not.

Man, Haruhiro missed Kikkawa. He was supposedly all right, so would they be able to meet again? There wasn't much hope of it. He couldn't help but feel that way.

A muddy stream. With their body paint and decorative cloths that they wore like a sash, the waluos swinging around their dragon sticks and torches seemed to be like a muddy stream surging backwards up the road in an attempt to swallow up Haruhiro and the others. It was honestly a bit hard to tell how many meters there were between Nono at the rear of the group and the front of the line of waluos, but it was less than ten meters. Well, it was a few meters.

Nono could probably shake them if he got serious. But Shihoru and Kuzaku would have had trouble, and Merry didn't seem like she'd have an easy time doing so, either. There was a sense in the air that it was only a matter of time now.

Weren't they out of moves? Wasn't this the end?

It was all Haruhiro's fault. Haruhiro had ended it.

Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, guys. I'm really sorry. It was me. It was my fault. I'm the one to blame. All of it. Me. What can I do to get you to forgive me? Yeah, nothing, I'll bet. Of course not. I mean, it's my fault, after all! No one else is to blame. It's all on me!

Haruhiro ran as fast as he could, crying and screaming despite himself. He didn't turn back. He only looked ahead. He was just scared. He didn't want to see anything, or to know anything.

Enough. It was over anyway. Because of Haruhiro, it was all over. They were all gonna die. They'd be beaten to a bloody pulp and brutally killed.

It was strange. No matter how much time passed, it didn't happen. It should have been any moment now, but Haruhiro was still alive.

He passed between two stone pillars with a dragon motif. He'd finally left the city. The steep cobblestone road continued, but there were no more buildings. The rocky mountain spread out to either side. There wasn't so much as a single tree growing here. Here and there, lava would spurt up as if from a pulsing vein, and there would be a puff of smoke.

"They're not comin' after us!" Yume cried, her voice full of cheer.

I see. That's right. Haruhiro wiped the sweat, tears, snot, and saliva from his face as he turned back. The waluos were there. They hadn't turned back. But they had stopped at the stone pillars. It was as if some invisible dam were holding them back.

Sacred land. Fire Dragon Mountain was probably sacred land to the orcs of Waluandin, so maybe they wouldn't chase them here. That had been Lala's read on the situation, and she had stated it clearly. In the end, it had been spot on.

Lala had won a calculated victory. Not just Nono, but Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, Merry, and Kuzaku might all have hope now. Haruhiro was the only one who didn't.

Haruhiro was alone in his utter despair.

He'd panicked so badly that he'd lost the ability to think straight. He was embarrassed. Incredibly. He wanted to just disappear. He didn't want to live in shame any longer.

The road turned into stone steps. It was so steep that, had they not been on a staircase, it felt like they would tumble down. When they got past that incline, it leveled out to be almost flat, and the road came to an abrupt end.

"Oofwhah..!" Ranta let out an odd exclamation. "There! There they are! Those're salamanders, right?! Hold on, how are they okay in that molten lava?!"

From there on, there were real ups and downs in the mountain slope, rivers of lava everywhere, and also springs of lava bubbling up. The salamanders would float in the lava, swim in it, and jump around in it.

Actually, if he were to describe them just how they looked, they were like clumps of molten lava in the shape of lizards. When they weren't moving, they were indistinguishable from the lava. That was why, as a matter of fact, Haruhiro had no idea how many salamanders there were. It was possible that all of that lava was salamanders. Well, that was probably not true, but he couldn't deny the possibility.

"Let's take it a little more carefully from here," Lala said quietly, as if they hadn't been particularly careful up until this point.

What kind of nerves did she have? Or was she just putting up a strong front? That couldn't be it. She just had nerves of steel.

Nono stood in the front, checking his footing as he moved forward. Lala was in second place, and behind her the line went Ranta, Kuzaku, Merry, Shihoru, Yume, and finally Haruhiro. They hadn't discussed it beforehand; it had just ended up this way naturally. Probably because Haruhiro hadn't done anything or said a word, everyone had assumed he'd meant to bring up the rear.

Haruhiro hadn't actually been thinking anything, but he had no complaints. If anything, he was grateful. He was happy to be in the back; the back was great. He didn't have to feel anyone's eyes on him. He couldn't take on a leadership role in this state.

"The reason we had our eyes on this place," Lala began to explain without

anyone asking her to, “was because of the presence of orcs. Because they’re in Grimgar, too. When a race exists in two different worlds, as a general rule, you can assume that those worlds are connected. Based on our experience, if that race has put down roots in a specific place, there’s usually a path between them there. Though, in many cases, there’s a reason they can’t go back and forth easily.”

“There’s a fire dragon here...” Shihoru held her hat down as she fearfully jumped across a thin stream of lava.

Immediately after she did, a salamander hopped out, nearly touching Shihoru’s leg.

“...Ohhh!”

“Y’think there really is a fire dragon?” Yume easily jumped over, and of course the salamander jumped again, too. Yume easily cleared both the lava stream and the salamander. “It’s too quiet here, after all.”

Haruhiro ran up and jumped as hard as he could, trying not to look at the stream or the salamander. He had to say something. It was strange for him to stay so quiet. But what would he say? It wasn’t like he didn’t have things he should be saying. If he said it, though, what would happen? He didn’t know. He didn’t want to imagine it.

“Y’think that’s the summit there?” Kuzaku pointed diagonally to the left in front of them.

There was definitely a dark mountainous shape in that direction. How far was it, distance-wise? A few hundred meters ahead? More, maybe?

“Hold on...” Ranta came to a sudden stop. “Haruhiro. You were saying something earlier, weren’t you, pal? Back in Waluandin. Also, man... you were crying. Was I just imagining that?”

Haruhiro just shook his head. He didn’t answer. When he tried to keep going, Ranta pushed aside their other comrades to close in on Haruhiro.

“You were saying something, something about how it was because of you. What’d that mean? Like, you said it was all your fault. You’re acting weird, too, you know? I mean, I know you’re weird most of the time. You’ve got those

sleepy eyes and all. But, even so, you're not acting normal. Man, what's gotten into you?"

"...Later," Haruhiro whispered.

"Huhh?"

"I'll tell you later. I promise I will. For now... it doesn't matter."

"It does matter." Ranta grabbed Haruhiro by the collar. "There's no way it doesn't! Don't give me that shit! Listen, man, there's nothing I hate more than when things are kept vague like this!"

"That's why I said I'd tell you later! Think about the situation!"

"What situation? You're not getting out of this! When I decide to do something, I do it! I'm gonna chase you down and get the truth out of you no matter what it takes!"

"Ranta! Stop!" Yume tried to interpose herself between Haruhiro and Ranta.

That pushed Haruhiro backwards. "Ah...!" He lost his footing, and in the direction he stepped, small or not, there was a pool of lava. His foot didn't land right in it, but his right heel brushed the lava slightly, and it sizzled and burned. "Urgh...!"

"H-Haru-kun?! " Yume cried.

"...No, I'm... fine...?" Haruhiro crouched down and rubbed his heel. He'd pulled his foot out immediately, so he didn't think it was anything major. That was what he hoped. He traced the outline of his boot with his fingers. How was it? The heel seemed kind of melted? Was it just the boot? What about the inside? It felt painful, and maybe hot...?

"I-I'm not gonna apologize, okay!" Ranta said arrogantly. "Th-Th-That was Yume's fault, and your own! I'm not in the wrong here, not one insignificant bit!"

"You're insignificant..." Shihoru murmured.

"Huh?! What was that, you rotten saggy titty bomber?!"

"R-Rotten... s-saggy...?!"

“Haru! Let me look!” Merry pushed past Shihoru, Yume, and Ranta to crouch next to Haruhiro.

Lala shrugged, looking at them in utter amazement. Nono brought his face close to Lala and whispered something in her ear. He might have been pressing her to make a choice. Like, *Isn't it about time we abandoned them*, maybe?

That was no good. No good at all. The party needed them to reconsider, or they'd be in trouble.

“Whoa, wai—” Haruhiro pushed Merry aside as she was trying to heal him, and stood up. The pain shot through his right heel, and he let out a bizarre little shriek of pain.

“Huh?” Kuzaku said something incredibly strange. “The summit moved?”

“Mountains don't move,” Lala said with a joyous purr in her voice for some reason. “In other words, that's no mountain, is it?”

“I-If it isn't...” Ranta turned and looked up at the summit—no, the thing they had thought was the summit. “Wh-What... is that thing...?”

It shook left and right—no, not just that. This sound. It was vibrating. Or rather, the ground was shaking. The thing was approaching.

“Run!” Haruhiro shouted reflexively.

“Wh-Which way?!” Ranta shouted back.

“I don't know which—”

Which way? Where would they run? Back? The way they came? How far? Could they go down the mountain? But they couldn't flee into Waluandin. That was obvious. What should they do? How should he know? Haruhiro naturally tried to cling to Lala and Nono.

They were gone.

They had been there until just a moment ago. No. He could see their backs. They were moving on. He'd lost sight of them for a moment when the shadow of a boulder up ahead blocked his view. That said, they were already more than fifteen meters away.

“A-After them! Follow those two! Hurry!”

“Damn it! That bitch!” Ranta shouted.

“Shihoru, go on ahead!” Yume cried. “Yume’s gonna be right there behind you!”

“Y-Yeah! Got it!”

“Merry-san, you go, too!”

“Okay! Haru, can you run?!”

“I-I can, yeah! Now hurry! Kuzaku, you too!”

“Kay!”

The tremors grew larger and more violent. Haruhiro desperately chased after Kuzaku’s back. When his right heel touched down, the pain shot all the way to the top of his head. All he could do was work to avoid his right heel touching the ground, running on the balls of his feet. It wasn’t easy, by any means.

Once the weight of their gear and other possessions factored in, Haruhiro was either the fastest or the second fastest runner in the party. Kuzaku was the slowest. Despite that, this was hopeless. Not only was he not catching up to Kuzaku, he was being left behind.

Kuzaku occasionally looked back, slowed down, and waited for Haruhiro. He was so happy he could cry, but it was no solution. Even if he closed the gap a little, it quickly opened back up, and sometimes got worse.

He suddenly lost sight of Kuzaku. Had he finally given up on him? No, that couldn’t be it. He passed through a narrow gap between two boulders and came out into a more open place.

It wasn’t just Kuzaku. Everyone was there. Even Lala and Nono were there, off in the distance.

Kuzaku turned back, looking at Haruhiro—and then at something further up.

“...!” Kuzaku let out a silent cry that was ominous, to say the least.

It might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but Haruhiro felt like he was being told about the end of the world.

He couldn't decide. Should he see it for himself, or was it best not to? Before he could make a decision, his eyes were sucked towards it. He didn't wish he hadn't seen it, and he wasn't glad that he had seen it. He was just dumbfounded.

He liked to think he'd encountered his fair share of creatures. Like the giant god in the Dusk Realm. Well, there was probably room for debate on whether that was a living creature or not, but it had been huge.

This thing wasn't an order of magnitude bigger than them like the giant god had been. But there was something in the shape of its eyes that made him feel a special, deep kind of emotion. They weren't pretty, or beautiful. It was different from that. If he were to sum it up in one word...

Terrifying. That was probably what they were, but that was certainly not all they were.

Its whole body was covered with reddish scales, or perhaps black scales with a red luster. On that point, it was similar to a reptile. In fact, it might have been fair to call it a giant lizard, but it really was different. It seemed to walk on four legs, but its front legs also seemed like they could grab things. It had hands that looked surprisingly dexterous. Its neck was pretty long, and its head was rather small. Small though it might have been, it was probably still large enough to swallow a person whole. It was a matter of relative size.

It wasn't fat. It didn't look slow-witted, and it seemed to move quickly for its large size. If it ran as fast as those powerful rear legs would take it, it was probably really fast. It lifted its long tail, stretching it out.

That's a dragon.

Most likely, even if they hadn't known that dragons existed, anyone would have been able to tell at first sight that this creature held a special position. If that person had then been told this was a dragon, they would accept it immediately. Even though they didn't know what dragons were, they would no doubt think, *Oh, I see, so that's what a dragon is.* Dragons had to be engraved in everyone's instincts.



It was little wonder the orcs of Waluandin worshiped it. It was easy to understand why they wanted to offer it sacrifices, too.

Haruhiro trembled, of course. This fear wasn't something he could feel normally. However, at the same time, there was something he couldn't help but feel.

Dragons are awesome.

Honestly, it was cool. Creatures like this actually existed. In a way, it was perfect. Now it may not be clear what way that was, but it was awesome.

Dragon.

The fire dragon opened its maw, twisted its neck, and inhaled. Was it taking a deep breath? He didn't know what was up, but Haruhiro watched it intently. It might have been more accurate to say he was entranced by it. There were little lights flickering in the back of the fire dragon's throat.

What are those? he wondered. That was all he thought.

"Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" When he heard Ranta's scream, he began to suspect that maybe he was lacking the proper sense of crisis here. He looked and saw that his comrades were making a mad dash to get away. They were like herbivores fleeing to get away from a pack of wolves. Of course, Ranta and the others were no herbivores, and there were no wolves to be found on this mountain. There were only salamanders and the fire dragon. It looked like Ranta and the others were trying to get away from that fire dragon.

Well, yeah, of course they're running.

Why was Haruhiro just standing there? If anything, that was the strange thing.

The fire dragon inhaled, and inhaled, and inhaled, then finally exhaled. No, it wasn't just breathing out. Or was that just what the fire dragon's breath was like?

Haruhiro rolled backwards. The hot mass that assaulted him left him unable to stand.

Fire. Flames. The fire dragon had spewed fire. He thought he might have burned, too. It was hot enough he wouldn't have been surprised if he melted

away completely. That's what it felt like.

How much time had passed? A few seconds? A few minutes? More than that? He didn't know.

Haruhiro lay on his side like a dried-out caterpillar. He was literally dried out. Steam was rising from all over his body. He was crispy and crunchy. His eyes, his nose, and his mouth were all dry. His skin looked ready to crack at any moment. He was scared to even blink. But if he didn't blink and work out some tears somehow, something seriously bad was going to happen to his eyes. The same went for his mouth and nose, too. His body needed to use all of its remaining water to moisten them, or he was in serious trouble.

He didn't seem to be on fire. That flame breath hadn't burned him. Well, that was probably because he hadn't taken a direct hit. Haruhiro just got hit by the aftereffects of it. Even that had been enough to leave him like this. If he'd taken it head-on, he would surely have been reduced to ash in an instant.

That meant the fire dragon hadn't been aiming for Haruhiro with its fire breath. Then where had it aimed? What was its target?

He could hear the tremors, the fire dragon's footsteps. He felt it. The fire dragon was on the move.

"Ranta and... the others... Merry... Yume... Shihoru... Kuzaku..." he managed.

His comrades were trying to run away. From the fire dragon, probably. Maybe from its fire breath. Was the fire dragon aiming for them? Not for Haruhiro, but his comrades? Had it spat fire at his comrades? That was why Haruhiro had been spared? Because his comrades? What was happening?

"I have... to look for them..."

That was right. What had happened wasn't the issue. First, he had to find them.

Haruhiro used a rocky outcropping on the mountainside to pull himself to his feet. His right heel hurt so badly, he thought it might crumble. The pain was actually what saved him. He was glad for it. He wished he could faint from the pain. No such luck. He had to search.

When he went in the direction his comrades had fled, he saw the fire dragon's back. The area where its flames burst had caved in, and there was a quagmire of molten rock at the bottom of the hole. It gave him a plain display of the flames' power. They'd have done more than turn him to ash. If he'd taken a direct hit, there might not have been anything left of him.

That being the case, maybe he wouldn't be able to find his comrades.

Don't think that, he told himself. Don't think stupid things. You can't think. Move. Make yourself move. Get your body moving. It all starts with that.

He couldn't convince himself that he wanted to follow right behind the fire dragon. That was much too dangerous. Haruhiro decided to take the long way around. The fire dragon might be looking for something. Maybe his comrades had gotten away. The fire dragon might still be chasing his comrades. If he circled around in front of it, he might be able to meet up with them.

That was right. There was hope. It wasn't hopeless.

While always keeping the fire dragon in sight, making sure not to get too close to it, or too far from it, he worked out his course. The terrain was his enemy. It was too rough, and too bumpy, after all. Lava peeked out from the places that were sunken and had looked like they might be paths he could use. There were always salamanders in the lava.

When he lost sight of the fire dragon, he fell into a sudden panic. In his feverish haste, he got burns here and there.

I should jump into the lava and end it all. He often caught himself thinking things like that.

When he caught a glimpse of the fire dragon in the distance, it gave him courage. The fire dragon was there. That relieved him, and he couldn't help but laugh.

"...They're alive, right? All of them," he mumbled to himself.

Don't doubt it. If you doubt it, you've lost. Lost? Lost to what?

To myself, probably.

To the weakness of my own heart.

He didn't think he was strong, but had he been this frail all along? He didn't know how much he'd thought he'd grown, but what the hell was with this sad state of affairs? It was beyond awful.

Did I think I'd grown? Did I think I could do it? Did I grow? Did I expect anything from myself? How stupid. In the end, I'm just a small fry. I'm a have-not. I mean, I have no talent. I worked hard because there was nothing else I could do. I feel like I'd done what I could have. Was it not enough? Maybe it isn't a matter of enough or not enough. It was hopeless either way. No matter how hard I worked, gave it my best, no matter what I did, there were always going to be limits.

What, did I think I would actually be able to do something? Maybe? That's hilarious. Look at reality. I knew it from the very beginning. I can't be anyone but me. I can't be anything more than myself. I'm just myself. I'm endlessly weak, and frail, and I haven't changed who I am. In the end, it can't be changed. There's no way for me to change.

I'm small and miserable, pathetically clinging to something, and while I may still be alive for now, it won't last long.

This is me.

I've had enough, it's time to end it.

Look, the fire dragon is so far away. Get ahead of it? Like I could. It hurts. Not just my right heel. I hurt all over. I don't want to walk. I can't move.

I'll just stay here.

Sit down, and stay put.

In fact, Haruhiro did sit down and hold his knees for quite a long time.

"Man, I'm mediocre..." he mumbled.

What a laugh. Honestly. If I've given up on myself, why don't I just give up entirely? Can't I do that? No, of course not. I'm not that graceful. It makes me think that this is just how things are. I'm so mediocre, it makes me hate myself.

I wanted to be someone special. That's the truth, you know? I hoped I could be. Like, geniuses, I admire them. Soma and Kemuri, or Akira-san and Miho, or

even Tokimune and his team, and then there's Renji. They're incredible. It makes me think, "If only I could have been like that." I just try to think about it. Because it's impossible. What can I do about the gap between us? There's nothing. Nothing I can do. There's nothing that can be done about it. I know that and all, but I'm just going to die without ever, even once, becoming someone special. What is there to think about a life like that? It feels lonely, and sad. Well, I'm fine with it, though.

No matter what sort of life you have, it's the one and only one you'll get, so it's special and irreplaceable, right?

There's no need to compare myself to others. When you're comparing yourself to others, there's only one standard. In the end, it's how you feel about yourself, right?

I can see where this is going, you know, even though I can't. It feels like it's all about to end, so, at the very least, I should give my own blessings to this insignificant life of mine.

"...Like you could, idiot," he muttered.

I wanted to lead a life I could proudly boast about to anyone. I wanted to be someone I could be proud of. I grew timid, thinking I couldn't do things, and that's why I ended up like this, but then I used that as an excuse, and acted like I was doing my best, and I tried to be satisfied with that, but in the end, you know what, this is pathetic. I haven't done everything I could have, and it feels half-assed, and that's no good at all, but the curtain's probably going to fall with me still feeling dissatisfied about it.

It wasn't like he thought, I'll give it my all, and tried to look forward. It was just too painful to stay the way he was. He simply couldn't sit still, and he stood up because he had no choice. That was the truth.

He couldn't say that he'd honed his senses at the time, but he felt a stabbing presence. Without turning, he did a forward roll. Something fell down right behind him.

To avoid using his right heel, he used his left leg as an axis to turn around, drawing his stiletto as he did. His enemy had a long machete-like weapon that he'd swung down at Haruhiro.

It wasn't that Haruhiro thought he'd get taken out if he tried to dodge, or anything like that. His body reacted on its own. Haruhiro plunged himself head first into his enemy's lower body.

When he tried to stab the enemy with his stiletto, his enemy jumped back and evaded it. Haruhiro charged in, not stopping to ponder questions like who the enemy was or why this was happening. At some point, he found himself holding not just his stiletto, but his knife with the hilt guard was in his left hand, too.

His right heel hurt. He'd be lying if he said he didn't feel the pain, but he didn't let it bother him. He attacked.

The attack.

He was on the attack.

The enemy's blade was about 1.2 meters long, meaning it had far more reach than Haruhiro's weapons, and the enemy was larger than he was too, so he wasn't going to be able to fend him off with Swat for long. Haruhiro didn't analyze the situation and come to that conclusion; he knew it instinctively. He had to close the gap and attack.

The only thing the enemy did was run around. He had a weapon, but he was half naked. From the look of him, he seemed to be an orc. He was slender compared to the orcs of Waluandin. But he probably wasn't just thin. His body was reminiscent of a bowstring pulled to its limits. His skin lacked greenness and was not smooth. It was raised in some places, twisted in others.

Maybe those were burn scars. It wasn't just part of him. It was his whole body. Those eyes. Could he see with them? Both of his eyeballs were muddy and white.

Whether he could see or not, even when he backed away, he never went near the lava. His movements were elegant. Like some sort of master martial artist. It was true, Haruhiro was pressing the attack and the orc was on the defensive. However, that didn't mean he had him on the ropes. He had leeway to work with. Plenty of it, probably.

Haruhiro might be being forced to attack. If he didn't attack, he'd be attacked himself. If he was attacked, it was highly likely that he wouldn't be able to

defend himself. If not for the wound on his right heel, he might have taken the risk and tried to flee, but there was no chance of it working when he couldn't even run properly. He wished he could talk his way out of it, but that wasn't possible, either. Even if he didn't feel he could win, he had to do it.

There was only one result. It was kill or be killed.

It was no time to calculate odds, but even without him considering it, countless thoughts raced through his head at high speed.

His enemy's footwork was unique. He was standing on his tiptoes. They seemed to be sinking into the ground.

His body was awfully flexible. He controlled his machete with just his right hand. His left hand wasn't even on it.

That machete. It didn't look like it was metal. Stone? It looked like it had been carved out of stone. That long machete made of stone might have been handmade.

Did he live here? How did he eat and drink? Was this a livable environment? He'd be attacking soon.

See, here it comes.

The orc twisted his body and pulled it diagonally. The long stone machete thrust forward.

Haruhiro didn't fall back. He couldn't avoid it. He put all his strength into a Swat with his knife with the hilt guard. He couldn't handle a combo, but if it was just one strike...

It was heavy.

The orc's strength was immense—but Haruhiro pulled it off. He deflected it and immediately went in to attack, but the orc slipped back and away from him, scrunching up his face.

Was that a smile? Fine. Smile away. Haruhiro wouldn't smile. He'd attack.

He got in close, striking out with his stiletto. He was always taking aim with his knife. He knew. He didn't need to think about it, he knew. The orc was enjoying this. He might have been crazy even by orc standards. He was enjoying the

fight, and trying to savor it.

The orc probably intended to force Haruhiro to give everything he had, and then once he was satisfied with what he'd seen, he'd kill him. That being the case, Haruhiro had just one small chance for victory.

Besides, he was already giving his all. He couldn't move any faster, or swing his stiletto any harder. This was his limit, so just keeping it up was tiring, and he'd only degrade from here. He couldn't turn this into a drawn-out battle. The more time that passed, the fewer chances he would have to attack. The orc probably knew that, too. If they fought, and fought, and fought until they were through, then luck, the situation, and a variety of other diverse factors would gradually drop off until, in the end, the strongest was guaranteed to win.

And, in this case, that wasn't Haruhiro. It was the orc.

That was why, before it came to that ultimate stage, Haruhiro had to throw everything he had into one desperate gambit. Of course, the orc knew that, too. He was trying to egg him into it.

Bring it on, he seemed to say.

Come on, bring it, he was saying.

That line was nowhere to be seen. Haruhiro saw an invisible, narrow bridge laid out in front of him, and he had no choice but to cross it. What was more, this guy was on the other side of the bridge. He knew Haruhiro was coming, and the orc was eagerly awaiting his chance to demolish him. His odds of pulling it off might not be zero, but they were close to it. Even so, Haruhiro would cross the bridge.

Because he had no choice? Because he had to?

No.

That's not it.

It's because I want to live. I don't want to die. I can't let myself die. I'll kill him, and live. Live. Live. Live for all I'm worth. I'll beat him. I'm gonna win this. Now, cross the bridge.

Assault.

He had thought he was giving his all before, but maybe he was wrong. Haruhiro surprised himself. He hadn't known he could move this fast.

Thanks to that, in a turn of good fortune, it looked like he was able to overshoot the orc's expectations for him, too. Haruhiro easily got in too close for him to reach. From there, all he had to do was stab like crazy with his stiletto, and slash away with his knife.

The orc quickly brought his knee up in an attempt to defend himself. Haruhiro stabbed the hell out of it, slashed it up, and pushed in.

The orc reached out with his left hand. He tried to hug Haruhiro and seal his attacks.

Haruhiro didn't worry about it, instead poking his stiletto through the orc's belly and gouging him. His knife slammed in to the orc's right armpit. He was in a position to push the orc down.

The orc wrapped both of his legs around Haruhiro and squeezed him, grabbing Haruhiro's hair with his left hand. Then he slammed the hilt of his long stone machete into Haruhiro's head.

Even so, Haruhiro continued twisting his stiletto around inside the orc's guts. Moving his knife around vigorously, he tried to cut the orc's right arm off at the shoulder. He bit the orc's neck. He tore into his skin, meat, and blood vessels. The blood overflowed. It wasn't just warm, it was hot.

Haruhiro bit into that open wound even more. The orc screamed. Haruhiro didn't let out so much as a grunt.

Destroy, destroy, I'll destroy you, destroy you, destroy you until you can't move. Live, live, I'll live, I'm gonna live. Win, I'll win and live, I'll survive. It's kill or be killed, live or die, I'm not the one who's gonna die, it's you.

Oh, wait, maybe I can stop now...?

No, not yet. He needed to do more. Haruhiro didn't stop until the blood coming out of the orc went cool. When he was completely, absolutely certain that the orc was dead, all the strength drained from his body, and he burst into tears. He felt like he was blubbering pretty badly.

He'd won. Haruhiro had won.

His opponent had been strong. In terms of pure strength, probably stronger than Haruhiro. Far stronger, maybe.

Why had Haruhiro been able to win?

He didn't think his opponent had been arrogant. The orc had never let his guard down. However, if his enemy's strength had been a ten, he'd probably assumed Haruhiro's was a five, or maybe a four. That was about how Haruhiro had felt, too. But at the last moment, he'd been able to add just a little extra to that five. That was all that had decided the battle. Indeed, Haruhiro had truly been gambling. It had gone just as planned. In that sense, it had been a perfect victory. The weak had overcome the strong, all by himself, with only his own strength, his own ability, and seized this victory.

Haruhiro looked down at the remains of the defeated. He wanted to learn what he could about his foe.

The orc was maybe two meters and twenty centimeters tall. There was no way to weigh him, but he had to be easily over a hundred kilograms. He could be two, maybe even three hundred kilos. That was huge. He'd looked slender, but he was still massive.

There were burn marks covering his entire body. The scars went down all the way to the tips of his toes. This had to be deliberate. He must have burned himself. There was some intricate design carved into his exposed fangs. A dragon, apparently.

Haruhiro went through all the orc's possessions. He had a belt around his waist, and there were pockets for items and a sheath on it. He had something that looked like a golden ring, four blackish scale-like objects, and a small knife. Haruhiro opted to take it all.

The orc's eyes were open, so he closed them, and put his hands together because that seemed like the right thing to do. It was a strange thing to think, and he realized that himself, but Haruhiro felt this orc had shared his life with him, and it was thanks to him that Haruhiro was alive now. That was how he felt.

Still, Haruhiro was bruised all over, and he was in such bad shape that it would be harder to find a part of him that didn't ache right now. The life that the orc had given him might burn out eventually. Even so, he was living on somehow. Since he was alive, there were things he ought to do, or rather there were things he really wanted to do, and things that he had no choice but to do.

He wanted to see his comrades.

He didn't think for a second, *I'm sure they're all fine, or, I'm sure we'll meet again*, and he had no high hopes of it happening, but he wanted it to. So he decided to search. Until his life ran out, he would keep on looking.

Leaving the orc behind, Haruhiro walked off. When he turned back after going a short distance, salamanders were swarming over the orc's corpse. Without a hint of irony or sarcasm, Haruhiro thought it was the second most fitting end that he could have received. The most fitting probably would have been for him to challenge the fire dragon and be incinerated by its fire breath or to be devoured. He hadn't been able to have that.

Haruhiro had no leads. Not even a direction to go in.

Whenever he occasionally saw the fire dragon off in the distance, he found it strangely encouraging, and he would naturally break into a smile.

When the pain and exhaustion made it too hard for him to walk, he accepted it and sat down to rest. He lay down sometimes, too. If he couldn't get up again, that would be that. He could just accept it. However, that wasn't likely to happen. If he lost consciousness, obviously there would be no helping that. However, until his time came, he was sure his wish would not fade.

I want to see my comrades.

After all I've been through, I'm not going to think that's pathetic.

Really, I don't want to be left all by myself. It's lonely.

There were a number of times when he not so much fell asleep as passed out. When he came to his senses, he was happy.

He was still alive. He could search again.

You know, like this, it feels like I've gone everywhere. When was the last time I

thought about that?

I was riding a bicycle—Bicycle...?

I dunno what that is, but I thought I could go anywhere on it.

I felt like I could go everywhere. What was it that got me out there? Oh, right. One of those things that you see all the time. The rainbow. It was after the rain. I saw a rainbow. Where did the rainbow start, and where did it end? I thought I'd go and see. I swore I'd find it.

I gave up along the way that time. Now, I wouldn't give up. I'd go all the way I could, and even if the rainbow vanished, I could just wait for it to appear again.

When I close my eyes, ah... I can see it clearly.

The rainbow.

The bow of seven colors beyond the sky.

I'll head towards the rainbow. I'll head for the rainbow, and never stop going.

He sensed a tremor and opened his eyes to find the fire dragon relatively close by. It was close enough that he could look up at it. He went to shake its hand, then stopped.

He decided to stay put. It felt like he might get stomped. If it happened, it happened, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He closed his eyes, and watched the rainbow.

At some point, the fire dragon left.

He was alive. Still alive. But his body really did feel heavy. Heavy, or rather sluggish.

I guess I can rest. Yeah. I'll take a rest.

He'd found a good place. There was a depression. For some reason, it was a little cool. A little? No, it was really cool. It was a wonder to him how the ground could be cool. It was hot everywhere here.

He slowly came to the realization that he was crawling. It was really hard walking, after all. It wasn't easy crawling, either, but it was better than walking.

How far did this depression go? It seemed to go on for quite a ways. But maybe here was good, he thought. Here was good.

Suddenly, he was engulfed by total darkness.

On the verge of it, he had a vague memory of thinking, *Maybe I'm done for*. And yet, his eyes snapped open.

It looked like he was alive. Stubborn, huh.

To live was to not die, after all.

He couldn't move so much as a finger. He was having a hard enough time just breathing. He went on in that state for a long time, and he had no real hope of recovering, but suddenly, it occurred to him that he could get up, and you never know until you try, so he did, and he could.

If this kept up, dying might take him a while. Did he have to keep living until then? Well, in that case, live on he would.

Even so, when he sat with his back against the rock wall like this, all the muscles in his body relaxed themselves as if some vital core had slipped free from it.

I can't see the rainbow.

It sure is dark, huh. This place is dark.

Wait, where is this place...?

A depression.

A cool depression?

He turned to face it.

That's—a hole, isn't it?

"...Seriously?" he whispered.

It was dark and his vision was hazy, so he couldn't see very well, but it was probably a hole. In the bottom of the depression, there was a hole that was about two meters across. It wasn't vertical; it was on a diagonal slant. He couldn't imagine it was just any old cave. Not with this coolness.

It was abnormal. This was a mountaintop covered with lava, after all.
Haruhiro was right in front of the hole.

It had to be the tunnel.

That hole led through to Grimgar.

“This... can’t be happening...” he whispered.

He could go back.

To Grimgar.

“This is... the rainbow’s...”

A moan escaped from the deep in his throat.

—How?

How is this the beginning of the rainbow? It’s the end of the rainbow. There is no rainbow. There never was. It’s an illusion.

It was always going to be impossible. I mean, at this point, I really can’t move anymore. Besides, what am I going to do if I make it back alone? That’s no good. I need my comrades with me.

Even if I search on my own, and I happen across the destination we were looking for, it’s meaningless, isn’t it?

Is this the conclusion that’s been waiting for me?

Is this how it ends?

How worthless.

But, and this is just a probably, if even a little of my strength were to return, and I was able to move forward, I’m sure I’d search for them. My comrades. Then, at the end of it all, I’d die alone. Even if it’s pointless, painful, and unpleasant, I’ll live for something until I die. I’ll keep living on.

I still don’t know if I’ll be able to wake up again or not. I can’t bring myself to think that I hope I wake up, but if I do, I’m sure I’ll keep struggling on in vain.

For now, I’ll sleep.

I wish I had someone to sing me a lullaby.

I don't like being alone.

Someone, be with me.

Someone.

...Please.

All I need is for you to be here.

“Awaken.”

A dream. It must have been a dream.

That voice. He'd heard it before.

It was a man's voice. Who was that? But he didn't hear it just now. That was why he must have been dreaming.

His eyes were shut tight with eye mucus or something. He struggled to get them open. What did he think about that? *I'm still alive*, maybe? It was a wonder that he was. But was he truly alive? This wasn't the world after death, was it? It was hard not to be a little doubtful.

He heard something. If it wasn't an auditory illusion, those were footsteps. He was still a thief, even if he wasn't much of one, so he could tell that much.

The footsteps were approaching. Multiple sources. It was probably five people.

"Ah..."

He heard a voice. He couldn't help but force himself to raise his head and turn his eyes towards the direction the voice came from.

I'm alive.

"Haru...!" Merry came running. She hugged him, and touched his face all over.

Merry. She sure is beautiful, huh. I'm realizing that all over again. Yeah. I dunno. What can I say? I have no words.

Haruhiro tried to smile. He wasn't sure if he managed it. He wasn't confident.

"Haru-kun, Haru-kun!" Yume cried.

"Haruhiro-kun...!" It was Shihoru.

"Haruhiro!" Merry shouted.

"No way, damn it! Seriously, you piece of shit..."



Don't call me a piece of shit, man, Haruhiro thought. Whatever, it's fine.

Well, no, it isn't fine.

Not really.

“I'll heal you right away! Haru! Can you hear me?! Hang in there! It's going to be okay! Everyone's here!”

Haruhiro nodded, then closed his eyes.

He could see the rainbow.

Afterword

I'm not great with action games. The reason for that is that I can't handle doing the same thing over and over.

While I'm playing, I start to see, *Oh, this is what I should be doing here*. I can play through once or twice like that, but I have trouble doing any more. I start feeling mischievous, and do something differently.

No, you may be thinking, *that's just a lack of practice*, and I could do it right if I just kept playing again and again. That might be true, but the truth is, I'm not great at folding my laundry either, and for some reason I can never fold it all the same way. Unless I really focus on getting them all folded the same and pour all of my attention into it... *Huh, that's weird, I have ten similar-looking T-shirts all folded in completely different ways*. That's what happens.

With T-shirts, if they're not all folded the same way, it's inconvenient when I go to put them in my dresser. It's the same for socks and underwear. My dresser is always a chaotic mess as a result.

Now, I think this is a matter of personality, or the way my brain is structured. My brain was just made that way for some reason. I like action RPGs, but I'm terrible at them. It's sad.

Now, there's still a bit of time between November 24th when I'm writing this afterword and when the anime *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash* begins broadcasting, but it's just around the corner. The other day, I was able to sit in on a dubbing session. It's shaping up to be a wonderful anime, and I'm looking forward to it. It's been an educational experience, too.

The manga version of *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash* that Ms. Mutsumi Okubashi has been serializing in *Gangan Joker* also follows the same fundamental outline as the novel, but the details and flavor are slightly different, making it stimulating for me.

I have to work harder as a novelist. *Grimgar* is just getting started, after all.

Haruhiro and the others can never move forward more than a step at a time, if that. The way things are going, I'm not entirely confident where they will be able to go, and whether they'll be able to arrive wherever that is, but if they keep on moving forward, the road will surely go on.

I will say, I do have some idea in my head of where I want things to end up. It's all up to them, though, so it's possible they may arrive somewhere else entirely, but if that happens, it happens. For the people who haven't had the chance to show up much yet, I plan for them to make appearances little by little, so look forward to that.

I've run out of pages.

To my editor, K, to Eiri Shirai, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji

Bonus Short Stories

The Making of a Mage

I'm called Shihoru. Shihoru is a name. Uh... my name. You might know that without me having to say so, but... just in case.

I'm a mage, even if I'm not much of one. As a mage, I can use magic. I learned in the mages' guild. At the guild, the mages who've become instructors teach us all sorts of things. About elementals. I'm not kidding, it's true, but... In our first class, *elemental, elemental, elemental*, they made us repeat the word eight hundred times. They immersed us in elementals, you could say.

When you've been immersed in elementals, you start to see elementals that are invisible to the eye.

Huh...? I'm just imagining them? Could be... you start to think. In fact, elementals can't normally be seen... but you learn to sense them. The elementals, that is. When that happens, that's how we mages become mages.

The Principles of a Paladin

Oh, hey there. Huh? My name? It's Kuzaku. I'm a paladin.

If you want to ask why I became a paladin, I dunno what to tell you, but, well, maybe it's 'cause I thought they seemed cool. Oh, also, I'm tall, and a dude, so I figured I should stand up front, y'know. Wouldn't want anyone thinking I was scared. I was kinda scared at first, though.

Well, anyway, paladins have a number of rules. One of them is, *Thou shalt not sully the name of Lumiaris*, and that means I can't just run away on my own. Basically, it's saying, *Don't be a coward*.

I dunno if I can follow that, but I think it'd be nice if I could. I mean, I couldn't before, and I regret it. I don't want to go through that again. But I'd like to avoid dying, too. It's tough on everyone when a comrade dies. I want to survive, and

to protect them. That's the sort of paladin I want to be.

A Lesson With Sensei

When she ordered him to "Die," Old Cat blinked his sleepy-looking eyes and said, "...Come again?" like an idiot.

When she watched this dull-witted youth looking confused, there was a little throbbing in her heart. She tried again, in as cold a tone as she could manage. "Become a corpse."

"...Uh, even if you ask me to, I can't... you know?"

"Oh, yes, you can, Old Cat. If you insist otherwise, I'll be happy to make you into a corpse personally. It'll only take a second."

"...O-Okay." The youth reluctantly got down on his belly. It was pretty bad. Sure, he had relaxed his entire body, but there was a strong sense that he was just lying there, and he didn't seem like a corpse at all. Besides, why face down? His face was pressed right against the floor. It was blatantly strange.

She nearly burst out laughing, but she somehow managed to hold it in. "Are you stupid? How are you supposed to be a corpse?"

The youth didn't respond. He seemed to be staying in character as a corpse. Oh, wow, this was hilarious. No, hold it in. Hold it in. She was his advisor, after all.

"Corpses are like this!" She sat on his back, adjusting the way his arms, legs, and neck were twisted. She deliberately did it in a way that caused intense pain, and the youth twitched each time, but he didn't let out a groan. Very good, very good. But still hilarious. She couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "That's what a corpse is like! Did you understand, Old Cat?"

The youth was still playing dead. That started a fire in her mischievous little heart. She slapped the youth in the back of the head. "I'm asking if you understood!"

The youth nodded. In her mind she let out a huge laugh, then smacked the youth in the head again. "Dummy! What kind of corpse responds to questions?!"

They don't! If you find one, I'd want to see it! You're a corpse! Get it?! Do you get it?!"

The youth seemed torn on whether to respond or not. He was still playing the role of a dead body, but his indecision was readily apparent. Even though he wasn't moving a muscle. Hilarious. But she wanted to reward his hard work. She stood up and—No, actually, she sat right back down. She stuck her hands in both the youth's armpits and started tickling him. "You're a corpse? A corpse, right? Isn't that right, corpse?"

The youth was accepting her tickle attack. He was making a desperate attempt to resist. Too desperate. It was seriously hilarious. Making a desperate attempt to go limp might have seemed like a contradiction in terms, but it was possible. The youth was doing it. When he did stuff like this, well, it wasn't enough to make her say he had potential, but he wasn't completely lacking in it.

Eventually, the youth got used to her tickling. Now that he'd gotten this far, the youth probably wasn't feeling anything. That was boring for her. Time to take it up to the next level. She leaned over him and whispered softly in his ear, "What's it like to be dead? Tell me, would you...?"

The youth gave no response, as if he really was dead. The little devil. These sorts of moves had been the most effective way to get to him originally. Well, how about this, then? "Hey, how about it? What's it feel like being dead?" she whispered, then nibbled lightly on his earlobe. "Hey...?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Barbara-sensei, not there!"

"You idiot!" She throttled him with glee. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"Gwahhhhhhhhhh! Y-Y-Y-You're killing me! I'm dying, seriously!"

"Corpses are already dead, so you can't die!"

"Aughhhhh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll die properly..."

"You're so cute!"

"Huh?! D-Did you just say something?!"

"I didn't say anything, and even if I did, corpses can't hear!"

"O-Oh... th-that's... right... urgh..." The youth passed out.

She patted his unconscious head, planted a kiss on his forehead, then stood up. Now then, how best to wake him up?

She licked her lips. “Honestly, you’re so cute, my inept little apprentice.”

Recollections of a Certain Nameless Volunteer Soldier

I was but a lowly volunteer soldier. I had no name... Well, I did have one, but I hardly ever used it myself. That was because I preferred to work alone. When I worked alone, I had no need for a name to distinguish myself from others, or to serve as an identifier. Even so, I obviously couldn’t live without interacting with other people to some degree, so I was occasionally asked for a name. When that happened, I had one answer I always gave.

“Well, Anonymous,” the woman said, using my pseudonym in a mocking tone, “Do tell, how are you planning to pay us back for this?”

“Ngh...” I would have loved to give her my response, but it was difficult in my current state. “Mmph, mmph, mmph!”

I did have a gag in my mouth, after all. Incidentally, my arms were also tied behind my back, my legs were bound at the ankles, and I was on my belly. What was more, this was on the street in Alterna. It was at night, though, so there was nobody passing by.

The woman looking down at me was illuminated by the moonlight. The woman was sitting on a masked man’s back with her legs crossed. She was using him like a chair. Lala and Nono. It was a bizarre scene that gave a glimpse into their warped relationship, but this was normal for them.

“Ngh, mmmmph!” *Anyway, could you at least remove this gag?* I desperately tried to ask them. “Mmph, nghngh...!”

“I can’t hear you. I can’t hear the voice of a man who sold us half-baked information, no, not at all. Not only did we waste our time thanks to you, we ended up in danger, too. Yet you didn’t even try to offer a sincere apology. What’s the matter with you?”

“Ngh...!” But how was I supposed to apologize like this?

In my defense, yes, I had sold a certain piece of information to Lala and Nono. It had been about a caravan led by Ainrand Lesley of the undead. Lesley had a massive fortune, and it was suspected that they would be carrying it. If somebody could steal even a fraction of it, they would be able to make a small fortune.

I had been pursuing this opportunity for many years, and just the other day, I had found a lead. Several of them, in fact. I had acquired three different pieces of information from three different sources.

I had passed one of the three on to Lala and Nono. I had, of course, kept quiet about it being a one-in-three chance.

There were three leads on the location of the Lesley Camp, the place where the caravan was stationed. I figured only one of my leads could be right. However, I couldn't follow up on all three of them myself. That was why I sold one to Lala and Nono, and one to another party.

Naturally, I'd planned to head out and investigate the one that seemed the most likely by myself, and in fact had done so. The result was that I'd been attacked by some orcs that may or may not have been working for Lesley, and I'd almost died.

"Nnngh, nnngh..." It was the same for me, I wanted to say.

The information had all been fake. It was bait laid out for anyone searching for the Lesley Camp. This was a common occurrence, I might add. It was something anyone searching for the Lesley Camp experienced once or twice. If they were going to get mad over something small like this, they'd never be able to find the Lesley Camp. Furthermore, it was immature of them to get mad so easily. It was their own fault for being deceived. They'd been asking for it, you could say.

"Anonymous, when I look you in the eye, I can tell you're not going to give us an honest apology," said the woman. "You weren't that respectable to begin with."

"Mmph!" Please, give me a chance. At least let me speak. I'm sure if we talk, you'll understand. Yeah, I mean, I was tricked, too. I'm one of the victims here. We can come to an understanding. We're the same.

“It’s time to teach you a lesson, Anonymous.” Lala rose from her personal chair, Nono. “We’ll have to give you a punishment befitting your misdeeds. I won’t be satisfied otherwise.”

Nono stood up, too. He approached me without a word.

No. Stop. Please. I won’t ask you to forgive me, you don’t have to, but stop it, please.

You can’t do that.

Oh, no... This is wrong! Stop!

I passed out, and when I awoke due to the bright light, I was surrounded by a crowd of people. I figured I was somewhere near the Yorozu Deposit Company in the northern district. The crowd were gawking at me, whispering amongst themselves, and laughing.

I was still bound and gagged, and now, to add insult to injury, my clothes had been stripped off, too.

In other words, I was buck naked.

If there was one saving grace in this situation, it was that I was lying face down. It was little comfort, but at least it was a little better than being on my back.



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 7

by Ao Jyumonji

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